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LADY SUSAN AND NOT THE CARDINAL

CHAPTER I

The little *Dampfer*, which had been shooting right and left all the way from Schertlingen, looking as if it were some strange, white fish disgorging and seizing its prey at intervals, first on this side, then on that, had stopped at Oberhofen to discharge an English clergyman and his daughter; a fat old lady; a traveller from a large firm in Berne; a young honeymoon couple, and a cargo of beer. It waited now to take on board a Swiss wedding party, the women dressed in national costume, with sleeves like wings and hanging silver chains, making each look like some antique ornamented bureau, but with modern hats of the cheapest kind, spoiling the effect, the men looking sheepish in broadcloth suits; an English frumpy, sweet-looking mother with two stockingless children wearing sandals and carrying butterfly nets; an old man with a valet; a consumptive youth with an anxious and devoted mother, and a couple of nuns going to the bedside of a dying count in one of the hotels.

Amongst those who came on board there was only one noticeable figure, that of a tall and very beautiful young woman, with a wealth of reddish gold hair dressed in that counterfeit simplicity which characterises the *chic* wealthy when they turn "tripper"—one could almost guess that she had put on all that was her oldest and simplest, and that she had nothing old. The hat of plain straw, mushroom-shaped, was untrimmed but for a scarf woven around it, half silk, half cotton; she wore a white linen dress, and over it, open in front, hung a loose coat of some light stuff, of the length described by mantua-makers as three-quarter, with huge pockets—manlike pockets—about it and a loose back. Carelessly thrown around her neck, with ends that reached far down, she wore a long scarf, soft and scrunchable, of undefined dead colours which mingled with everything, with the colour of her hair and the scarf on her hat, with the scenery; and over her bosom lay a long chain of some dull metal—it might have been silver or steel of quaint workmanship. At her heels followed a poodle who had once been black, who still struck one as black, till on closer observation one detected russet-brown and grisly-grey in patches, which told the world that this was an elderly dog.

He walked behind her with the dignity of a jester of middle ages following in the train of an archbishop, conscious that only decorum of manner could save him from being ridiculous. Yet the man who stood watching the crowd leaving the boat, and going on to it, the man of no age, who might be forty-five or thirty-five, according to his surroundings, detected the something which is imperishable in some, the something which clings always to those who have inherited "the right of way."

He had not yet had time to realise that her face was beautiful. The slim, gloved hands, and the simple bangle, and the wrist with its tiny, mysterious bag hanging to it, the walk, the callousness of criticism, the attempt at severity of appearance, the speechlessness which yet conveyed a certain self-consciousness—the self-consciousness of those whose presence and appearance have always attracted attention—told their own tale. This was no ordinary woman. The appellation "woman" hardly described her, she looked so girlish; yet as his glance strayed towards her now and then, he felt convinced that she had partaken of the tree of knowledge. There was in her face the expression of satiety of those who have, and the desire for more, which must be the result of such a partaking.

It was her *soigné* refinement which gave him a sense of satisfaction. He had stood close to her while she took her ticket, not meaning to, but wedged in by the others who came and went, and the few words she uttered, almost churlishly, betrayed an adorable voice and a perfect knowledge of French; then, as the man made a mistake, and gave her a *retour billet*, of German.

Now the poodle barked at the shore, as if he derided it, and he heard her murmur,

"Don't, Teddie!"

Of course she was married, or she wouldn't be travelling alone. Fancy such a woman being alone! She went and sat under the awning with the poodle beside her, sitting sideways and looking out on to the scenery.

Once again the thought flashed:

"Fancy a woman like that being alone! What a waste of time, for her, for others." Then he, too, settled himself down far away from her. What, after all, could it matter to him? She would be met presently by a worshipping husband, by children and nurses perhaps.

But always her presence dominated, emphasising the uneventfulness of the distant mountain peaks, of the suave organisation of travel which has ceased to surprise in Switzerland, of the simplicity of everything, face to face with revelation of wonder of beauty.

Like all men of the world, he felt the uncomfortable irritation which comes with the realisaunemployed of all, the social tramp who hasn't even a slum to wrangle in.

He did not know that he stayed in Spiez because he wanted to know who she was—to see her again.

There was something at once suave and scathingly abrupt about the proprietor, which abolished all courage to ask him if he knew who the people were who lived at Aeschi. If they told him, he could not know which of them was the wonderful girl-woman with the poodle. Yet something within whispered that she would be the greatest of them all.

CHAPTER II

At the door of the *châlet* Joséphine came forward, pushing unceremoniously past the Italian butler, to take the Duchessa's cloak and parasol. There was a new solicitude in her manner, perhaps a shade more of gravity in her expression, but only the gravity that comes with increasing years, not the gravity from within, which gradually steals to the features, and sets them, as it were, in a fixed mould of established character.

Joséphine still hesitated on the very threshold of matrimony. Adolphe was still sullenly faithful; but Joséphine, who once had even fixed the date of the wedding, had recoiled again, before the vista of monotony, which the prospect of belonging to Adolphe entirely unfolded.

Since Susan had married Rinaldo d'Ostia, she had never laughed with Joséphine in the old way; her nearest approach to it had been perhaps when once she had asked her why she did not make up her mind to marry Adolphe and had given as a favourable argument,

"Vous le connaissez si bien."

In this, it seemed now to Lady Susan, lay all the elements of happiness,—to know the man she married. She had hardly known anything about Rinaldo, she had thought she knew the Cardinal; however, girls knew nothing till it was too late; perhaps after all it was better not to know.

"Trop bien, Miladi."

Joséphine continued to call her "Miladi." Her sigh of boredom as she said this had brought back for an instant some of the old amusement at things real, to Susan.

"Pauvre Joséphine!"

She could imagine, Susan, how uninteresting it would be to marry a man one had known for years. When Adolphe urged, Joséphine put forward always the sad example of Susan's marriage.

"Quand je vois ça, n'est ce pas?"

Adolphe knew quite well that she only made this an excuse to keep him off. He had tried his hand at many other flirtations, and done it so awkwardly that he had failed to make her jealous, but when she said this, he grew angry.

"Mais vous n'êtes pas une duchesse, voyons!"

Such catastrophes as had befallen Lady Susan were the compensating afflictions of the "aristocrat"—that absurd aristocracy, whose only use was to make poor beggars like himself, like Joséphine, live. Fate had to humour them by dealing tragic blows, since it was all they could have of sensation; but at least there was some justice in life, since in his class, husbands and wives loved and respected each other, and had perfect trust in each other.

He had a dimly-formed idea that the *grande noblesse* had to have some great sorrow in order to be really *distinguée*, much as in Mohammedan countries the bride has to look sad on her wedding night. It was good form.

Joséphine knew very well that she was not a *duchesse;* she had no wish to be; but Adolphe . . . The florist at Rome had been superseded, and others had tripped up on to her platform many times, all to be repudiated after a time as not having, in her mind, such *bonne façon* as Adolphe, yet in her mind, too, she stowed him away as *une poire pour la soif*.

She had no fear of losing him; men were like that, when you refused them they were faithful. When the example of Miladi's matrimonial troubles failed in power of argument, then she pleaded delay on economic reasons—they had not saved enough. The added solicitude for Susan had come the night she had left Rome and never returned. It had been the great event of Joséphine's life, the night they left Rome.

It was the night the Cardinal, her *Magnificenza*, had pointed to the door and said "Go!" Joséphine had sat up for her all night, and Don Rinaldo had sat up too—not for her exactly: he did not think she would return—but pacing the floor of the great *salon* of the Palazzo d'Ostia, wondering, wondering, aghast at the tragedy of it all; crushed, yet given over to a still more terrible dread, one which dulled for the moment the grief of losing Susan, the strange wonder of it, the dread lest morning should bring with it the mixing of his name with that of one of the gravest scandals the Church of Rome had known for centuries; yet mingling with the dread, was the certainty that this scandal could not come to pass. If it did, then Rome would cease to be Rome, the Church—everything—would be swept away beneath the human touch. If it did, then he, Don Rinaldo, would have no other alternative than to end his life.

His life! For the first time the mystery of life, of its hidden depths and its superficiality, struck him, who had never seen it with other eyes than those which looked out from behind tradition and blind faith.

And from behind the mystery, peering, as it were, through mists of strangeness, Susan's eyes seemed to be gazing into his. Was it possible that a woman, almost a girl, could by her own act upset the methods of life, change its very rhythm, the cadence of the incomprehensible song, which moans of the past and preludes the future, while its final chord remains for ever unuttered? Or that it was but a careless adventure, which decorum and dignity and hide-bound creed and tradition made grotesque? She had often said so to him. She had said once, "When anything real happens, then one sees what a farce it all is, this system of the Vatican, the shocked gravity of the priests, the officialism. . . Oh, how ridiculous we all are! Blind moles, running in and out of the earth, ants creeping over the face of the earth, who may be swept off it at any moment; and one word, an accent, an inflexion of the voice, changing the whole mood of things in a moment. Just see how they would all look if a big fire burnt the Vatican to the ground. Can't you imagine how human they would all become, darting about here and there, and getting cross? Oh, yes, Rinaldo, they would be dreadfully cross at the expense of it all. I can see them in my mind." She had placed her thin, pointed fingers over her eyes. "I can see them, black dots against the flames; the flame would catch at their skirts, wouldn't it, like ink-spots on yellow blotting-paper?"

And he had laughed, because his passion for her was new and rich in its freshness, in its commencement.

Now, suddenly, he wondered as the Cardinal had wondered, whether she was the scarlet woman.

The scarlet woman, because she vibrated with life: and the understanding of life, whatever the pessimists may say, is gladness.

Yet who can blame him because, schooled into rigidity by the self-control of centuries, he told himself that without enforced decorum and method, and even officialism, the world would be chaos ? He was in a sense right, and he was to be pitied. Everyone was to be pitied in those days who came close to Susan Roach. She was beyond them all, even beyond the Cardinal, who could not see the childishness beneath the effervescence.

The fear of the human of his fellow-human, how piteous, how grotesque it is ! The world's blackmail, how primitive it is in its threats. You have done this and this ; you have said this and this, and you must pay, pay, pay—pay, because you have frightened one who cannot understand you, who cannot cope with you. There are only two alternatives : you must do as others do, so that I should not be frightened, or you must be cast out. . . . Oh ! wonderful psalmist, oh ! great King David, who sang—

"I will not fear what man shall do unto me."

A hundred years only since they burned understanding women as witches. Why have there been no men-witches ? Because someone had to do the burning. And it was all so simple ; if Rinaldo had only known it, a hearty, boyish laugh would have dispelled it all. He need only have taken her hand and showed that he understood and was strong: a little sense of humour, and Susan Roach would have become more than human.

"My little one, fancy thinking you care for a fusty old priest, when I love you, love you. Let's motor out into the open and whisper our love to each other in the moonlit night. . . Make the stars jealous because they can't get closer to each other."

A touch of the real would have subjugated her. She would have rushed away with him, anywhere; but instead, he had weighed her inconsequent words and recoiled before them, as she stood there in front of him and told him, with the hysteria of *exaltée* women, that she had never loved him,—that she loved the Cardinal of Rome.

He should have laid his hand on her shoulder and uttered,

"I'm sorry, my dear; but as you can't marry the Cardinal, and I am your husband. . . . I insist on your loving me—me—do you understand?—Rinaldo d'Ostia,—and I'm going to make you love me, and no one but me. Now do you understand?" She would have laughed with gladness at the mastery in him. There would have been the dogged persistence in it which resembled the American love, and in an hour, if he had known how to manage her, she would have been laughing at her infatuation for Sapponi, her *Magnificenza*, and have passed out of his life. But the men of the present day have lost the art of dealing with women. Little wonder if women scoff, for they are to-day, as they always have been, capable of rising to heights beyond the ken of man, yet willing to crouch at the feet of the strong. The feature of the twentieth century is this: that the man has to be very, very strong—magnificent—before the woman will bend to him. He must have the strength of lions and the tenderness of the summer breeze, the rippling, murmuring tenderness of the summer breeze.

But Rinaldo had stood there and listened to her tale with horror.

And late into the night he wondered—wondered if it were possible that the Cardinal, too, loved her. No, it was not possible. Human impulse has been cornered by the Church of Rome; made into a huge trust, frozen. If she loved the Cardinal, she would bruise herself against her own emotions. The Cardinal could never, never love her—never. If he did—well, he could crush his love as he would crush a scorpion beneath his feet, and face agony with a firm countenance, and holding out a hand to him, Rinaldo, he would say,

"This woman who haunts us both, we must vanquish her—vanquish her—or cast her out."

If she came back now—to-night—he, Rinaldo, would not cast her out. The very mystery of her fascinated him. The outer man, the human case, craved, yearned for her.

And she had not returned.

"I am going to him," she had told him; and he wondered if she had had the audacity to do so. If she had, and she did not return, then what did it mean?

It would mean that the Church of Rome was a farce. It would mean that woman dominated the universe, that they were all in hell, or that there was no hell, no heaven, no God; only an earth, which derided Gospel and tradition alike.

He, in the badly lit *salon*, which had made Susan call it dismal, with Joséphine in her bedroom above, and Adolphe in the hall below, waited, wondering, terrified. Then at dawn there had rung out a bell, and Adolphe had opened the door and received into his hand a note addressed in the handwriting he knew so well. It was addressed to Joséphine. Even he, the chauffeur, could realise what a hurt it would be to Don Rinaldo to learn that it was for her maid, not for him. There are blows that women deal to men now and again, which hurt more than the throes of childbirth.

He could not ask Joséphine what it contained, what were her mistress's commands. Another man perhaps would have forced the information from the woman, and gone and found her; and, because he could not condescend to stoop to inquiry, because his pride, though finding another footing than hers, yet hung poised as far aloft as hers, he understood that she would not seek him again after what she had told him; not if he were to count her words as an expression of thought, as words at all. Dawn! Where had she been between the hours of this night when she left him, and dawn? The passion of jealousy was like physical pain, as fancy pictured to him where she had been, then flung the picture away. No, not with His Eminence—no—no! The Church of Rome chose its men too well, and Sapponi—no, not that! Then where? She had told him so many things which her own presentment belied. Then where?

Only Susan herself could tell him.

Her orders to Joséphine were brief. She was to pack all she could, as quickly as she could. She and Adolphe were to come at once: she named an hotel on the very borders of Rome. There Susan would meet them. She was to tell no one where they were to meet. She had underlined the words *no one*, and though she gave no name, Joséphine knew that she meant Rinaldo. She thrust the paper into the bosom of her dress; she would not tell even Adolphe where they were going till they had started.

The last words were "*apportez Teddie,*" written underneath the signature.

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And while the maid packed, she wondered, feared, dreaded, lest Don Rinaldo should come and question her, or forbid her to go, or prevent her taking Teddie and her things to her mistress. But at six the automobile had come to the door, and the trunks and bags had been taken down the stairs, and Teddie had jumped, barking joyously, into the motor, without a sign from the master of the house. Only as they departed, glancing backwards once at the Palazzo d'Ostia, which had become in one night a house of mystery, they saw his face at one of the windows of the ground-floor, stern and pale, the early light and the long night making the complexion look sallow, yellow, like pollen. An artist, or a connoisseur of the old masters, must have been reminded by his appearance of the printed catalogue of an art gallery.

"Portrait of young man, by Velasquez."

It was something besides though, that had left its strongest impression on Joséphine. The expression on Lady Susan's face when she had come down the steps of the hotel, quietly, grandly, with a gravity added to, rather than diminished, by its want of harmony with her beauty and youthfulness, and mounted speechlessly into the motor, returning Teddie's noisy caress with a soft pat on the head, wordless; then at last uttered, between her teeth almost, "Go on quickly, out of the town; I will tell you where to stop."

After that, strange, bewildering days had passed, bewildering because of their strangeness, their weirdness almost, and yet without adventure. On they had sped all that morning, then stopped at a little village, where the servants had had dinner and Lady Susan a cup of coffee, then at night they had reached Pistoja and put up at an hotel, and the next morning Lady Susan had given her instructions. She wished to go to Switzerland. After that, many days had passed with a strange sameness, or with differences which had only emphasised the similarity. When they could they had motored; when later the country became too hilly, she and her maid would go up by *funicular* or take the train, while the motor took the lower road; then they would meet it again and speed onwards. To the two servants it meant only the weariness of servitude; to Susan it meant the clearing of her thoughts. Each twist and turn of the road brought more luminous vision; each new panorama of scenery,—yonder sun-bathed peak, or close pine-clad slope and stream-riven gorge,—brought soothing and comfort, and God knows she needed it! Her *Magnificenza* did not love her; instead he spurned her, cast her out, and Rinaldo—Rinaldo hardly counted at all in the sear, dreary, rockbound landscape of her soul's wanderings. Rinaldo! How could she go back to him, after what she had told him? He would not want her to. What then was her life going to be? She could deal with it no longer from the high pedestal of social position which had been hers; henceforward, if she could deal with it at all, it would be only with her wealth. She would have to buy her freedom again, she told herself, with the sense of reckless humour which yet was her most precious gift—buy it as her mother had bought her, Susan. As she had bought hers of her brother, so now she would have to buy the world's respect, which she had forfeited.

When she thought of Rome it was with a shudder, as if she had fled from a burning Gomorrah. In the midst of prayers, every one it seemed to her blasphemed against nature. There was no time, intoxicated by incense, suffocated with services, deafened by bells, to live and feel. It was like a palpitating breast against which she had laid her tired head, and whose palpitations agitated, instead of soothing. It was a seething hot-bed of religion, a factory turning out ardent souls by the thousand, by some whirling, terrifying process of machinery which had always been, would always be, and which did not trouble about what became of the souls when they were turned out. Had she met Rinaldo anywhere else, she told herself, in dear, sane, sweet America, she would have known that it would be impossible to marry him. Instead, she had promised to do so in the Pope's garden. Had she been mad ?

But as she neared the mountains her brain became cooler. Here nature was solemn, and restful, and aloof.

Now, once in Switzerland, they had gone from place to place, shunning the big hotels, avoiding the places frequented by tourists, yet even in out-of-the-way places arousing the interest of the stolid, stranger-surfeited Swiss.

There had been two nights at the Spiezerhof, Lady Susan registering under an assumed name ; then near Aeschi, weary of " moving on," she had taken a *châlet*.

" Not twenty-one, and quite alone, quite alone in the world." She repeated this often to herself, the wonder of it not even penetrating to her own comprehension. Had her mother, Bianca, ever felt like this ? Was it possible for women to feel so isolated, who had mother, and father and husband. Husband—the word meant nothing to her. . . . a husband should be a second self, who sought one out even to the ends of the world, because without her he would feel incomplete. Slowly, gradually, the great silence soothed her, and with the soothing came a dull, strange calm. She had burnt all her ships—all of them had passed out of her life. Far away in Rome the voices, the tongues, were busy with her name perhaps, but she didn't hear what they said. She read no letters, saw no newspapers. She was like one dead, and neither Rome nor her friends, neither her father nor brother had heard or seen of her more.

And she was right when she fancied that the clamouring voices rang out with her name.

The day of her disappearance had been one of strange, oppressive wonder to two at least of those who had known her. Rinaldo, in the Palazzo d'Ostia, passed from a sleepless night to almost a terror of dread of the coming day, and the Cardinal, while he strove to put the thought away from him, had felt an uneasy restlessness the whole of the morning. This morning, indeed, Guiseppe had to keep him straight throughout the early mass.

Bianca's child, where was she—the storm child—cast out into the storm of life? When he thought of her again and again, it was with anger at first; then his thoughts changed, and he saw her sweet, mutinous face in his mind, the picture of a wayward, precocious, yet innocent child.

A thousand impulses had risen in Rinaldo's mind, then died down. To go and ask the Cardinal where Susan was would be an insult. He, the youth who had been pillowed on the breast of the Church of Rome knew, would have sworn, that it was out of the question that she had gone to him. The Cardinal would not even discuss with her that she should leave her husband. Where, then, had she gone?

She had said to him before her marriage, "Of course, if you are ready to accept surprises of all sorts, I'll marry you if you wish it, but you know I can't ever answer for myself;" and he, courageous with love, had laughed—not treated her words seriously. She was a precocious child, loving the sensational, trying to frighten him; after her marriage she would be just like every other woman. And then, suddenly, during the first week after their return from the brief honeymoon, she had herself curtailed, oh, how characteristic of her it had been, the way she said to him,

"You know, Rinaldo, if you don't take me away from this, right this minute, I'll grow to hate you! I never was so bored in my life." She had told him this inexplicable, astonishing thing—that she was in love with Cardinal Sapponi.

"I never knew how much till lately. . . I must go to him, see him, tell him about it."

If it had not been for Susan's gift of making even the impossible seem real—realistic—he would have treated that, too, as foolishness. He did not fear the rivalry of Cardinal Sapponi. What he did recoil from, was the revelation of Susan's mind: he felt as if he leaned over an abyss and saw something terrible, abnormal, terrifying, which yet fascinated.

Yet he had not feared to lose her when she said that she was going back to her *Magnificenza:* he, the Cardinal, would treat it, too, as foolishness. But this morning she had vanished, her maid and her servant and the dog had gone —where? It was that unanswered "where," which made him stay within the walls of his Palazzo all the morning, fearing to go out lest some fearful truth should meet him on the way; wondering with a sickening foreboding, what news would presently be brought to him; wretched, crushed by Susan's repudiation of his passion, and yet with an underlying consciousness that if he had known how to deal with her, he could yet have been happy, have subjugated her.

Would she come back one day? That was what he asked himself, as he realised once, with a force which made him throw himself down in a chair and bury his head between his folded arms on the table and sob like a child, that Susan had taken away with her all the permeating radiance and vibrating life of the place, of his dishonoured home.

Was it dishonoured? That was the torturing thought. If it was so, then what of the Cardinal . . . ? Oh, no, that thought he could not harbour for a moment. Had she gone to the Cardinal . . . . That was what he could not even ask, since it seemed to him as if he could hear her speak. Phrases she had used, absurdities and profound things, too, she had said, flashed through his mind: was it his fancy that there had always been a note of warning contained in them?

He could for an instant imagine her again with him, in a few weeks, months, after long years perhaps, and he could fancy her asking him, "Did you go to the Cardinal; did you go and look for me there? Did you go and say, 'Your Eminence, please can you tell me where my wife is?'"

It was quite on the cards that she would return and ask him that. It was this certainty of the uncertain, the unguessable, in her, which saved him from despair.

And by this evening everyone was talking of the disappearance of the Duchessa d'Ostia. The anti-clerical papers were full of it, though the name of the Cardinal was not mentioned. Instead, someone else, unnamed but well described, was hinted at. It was the Contessa Figi who first told the Cardinal what everyone was saying; she came "ghoulishly to gloat," Cardinal Sapponi put it to himself; at just the same hour at which, on the preceding day, he had ordered Susan from the room, the Contessa's carriage drove up to the door.

It would be more prudent to see "the old witch," he said to himself, and she entered with a newspaper in her hand; a newspaper folded thickly, so that only *the* paragraph could be read. But the Cardinal was ashamed of his own dread as she handed it to him, and for once she kissed his ring without fervour.

But for once the Cardinal wronged her in his heart. She had not come only "ghoulishly to gloat;" she had perceived that in order to please Sapponi one must have a little of the Christian spirit, if not inwardly then at least outwardly. It would be better, of course, if one could be possessed of a little sincerity, but it was difficult in Rome. She, poor "Figi," felt slightly abased as she came to the Cardinal this late afternoon.

"Have you heard? Oh, what can be done?"

She held out the paper to him, and unwillingly he scanned it.

"What an absurdity!"

He handed it back to her.

"His mother, Carlotta d'Ostia, is in despair. She is ill at Montevecchio and I went to see her this afternoon; she sent for me. Rinaldo has not been near her—she does not know where he is. . . . I am going to call at the Palazzo d'Ostia, but I thought I would come here first, I thought that——"

She, too, could not say to the great Cardinal Sapponi, "I thought you would know." He smiled inwardly at her confusion; then he, too, became grave. It was the first time that he had felt really guilty about Susan. He had seen her last, and he had told her to go, and she had gone. What she had said to him had made it imperative for him to do so: he had done right. He resisted the suggestion that had he been less stern, less imperious, treated her more as the precocious child, and taken her less seriously, he might have persuaded her to return to Don Rinaldo. Once more the irritated feeling returned, the chafing sense of injustice at the thought of the responsibility Bianca had laid upon him.

He wasn't going to tell the "Figi" that he had seen Susan the night before; he hoped he would not have to tell anyone. Women had no right to put men, especially men of his standing, in such a position. He had been foolishly kind, and now, of course, everybody was down upon him, naturally. If he told anyone, it would be Rinaldo, if he came to him; but the gentleman in him, which, in a way, was so apart from him as a priest, reminded him that it would be impossible to tell Rinaldo what she had said.

"I would not go to the Palazzo d'Ostia if I were you," he told the Contessa, "she has probably only gone away for a few days' rest, for change of air. Good heavens! can't a lady leave Rome for a few days without these disgusting papers making a whole sensational romance of it? What are we coming to? To-night she will return probably. No, no, it is no one's business but Don Rinaldo's."

"Then you think——" The Contessa was amazed at the aspect he put upon it all. He made out that there was nothing in all these rumours.

"I think nothing," he interrupted her hastily. On his lips were the words, "I know nothing," but sincerity barred their way.

"I merely suggest that it is not our business, not yours, not mine. What, after all, can we do if all this is true? And if it is not——"

"His mother is my great friend." The Contessa Figi was beginning to feel infinitesimally insignificant, bewildered.

"Ah, well, later if we find that it is true——. But what do we know about it?"

"I wanted to help, to prevent a scandal, to go to her: she is so young, so beautiful. Young people sometimes do not understand each other."

The Cardinal's face softened.

"Ah well, later, perhaps, if——. But of course it's all absurd." He laughed a little, and that it was not his usual, breezy laugh, remained unnoticed by the Contessa.

She spoke now of other things. Then she departed unsatisfied. She seemed to herself more of a failure when she tried to be kind than when she was annoyed. Now that Susan was married to Don Rinaldo; now that she no longer lived beneath the Cardinal's roof; now that she was one of them; had entered that wonderful exclusive Roman aristocracy which is the only thing, except the buildings, the churches and walls and palaces, which survives of ancient Rome, and which has something viciously lasting about it which resembles the buildings; she was no longer jealous of her. She was ready to help to soothe agitation, and His Eminence gave her no more encouragement than he had when she was curious. She drove off as she had done, so long ago it seemed now, that night when she had first met Lady Susan, and leaned back and closed her eyes, wearily. She did not dare to go to the Palazzo d'Ostia now that he had forbidden it. She would go home and wait for the progress of events. She did not know that what depressed her was the tameness of it all, the dreariness of the aspect; still less did she know the similarity of her feelings to those of Lady Susan.

To both of them Cardinal Sapponi was dead sea fruit.

CHAPTER III

"CAN you tell me where that fellow—what on earth's his name?" This time the Cardinal's laugh was the breezy, accustomed one, "that chap you kicked downstairs."

"Lori, your Eminence."

Once more the enthusiastic porter had been round the corner to fetch Vandegger because a Cardinal of Rome, *un amplissimo porporato*, waited in the artist's studio.

He must after all be a great, great painter, the porter thought; for the Italian mind, even in the present day, associates great talent with the highest social rank. The spirit of the Borgias, of the Medici, dies hard. Who can tell when and where it will reappear again?

This time the links of the past made the meeting of the artist and the Cardinal less ceremonious. On Vandegger's face shone the honesty which had been recognised and developed by Prym.

Vandegger found the Cardinal standing in front of the Sapho picture. The portrait of Lady Susan had been taken away by Don Rinaldo. It hangs now in the Palazzo d'Ostia. Now it had become possible for Vandegger to divorce the two pictures from each other in his mind. The Sapho was going to London in a few weeks: it had nothing whatever to do with the portrait of the Duchessa d'Ostia, except perhaps in the Cardinal's mind.

All the time that Susan had been with him rose up, as the Cardinal gazed on the picture.

How wonderfully everything was intermingled in this world! The grotesque with the solemn, method and decorum with chaos. Who could explain it all? It was Lady Susan's mouth which he detected in the Sapho picture, and it was such a good mouth. It so absolutely counterbalanced those wonderful eyes, which seemed like misleading beacons, like treacherous lakes with whirlpools beneath.

Only in the moment of crisis did the Cardinal visit studios. Once, to save Susan, he had come. Now he had come to try and learn where she was, with whom she was.

He fancied that it all distressed him; instead it was really the only adventure of his present life, which was so set, so methodical. He didn't know, the dear, human Cardinal, that he had come here, the afternoon of the day after the Contessa Figi's visit, because he felt horribly guilty.

She had disappeared. Even His Holiness had heard of it, though he didn't for a moment suggest that Sapponi knew anything about it. She had disappeared, and the whole question now was, had she disappeared alone? The papers hinted that she had gone away with Lori; everything therefore now rested upon the question, " Where was Lori?"

The Cardinal fancied that Vandegger could tell him, he was a good, honest boy, in the Cardinal's mind. Vandegger had not heard the gossip yet, not seen the papers. He had grown away from the d'Ostia *entourage;* a woman's glove was all that remained to him of that episode, when he had been near losing his head over Susan, and she had sprung away from him—gone to Rinaldo, and taken on the aspect to him of the tantalising, intangible image of fantastic dreams. Strange to say, though, by a mere coincidence (the gist of it hadn't mattered when he heard about it), he had just heard, while he lunched, that Lori had left Rome, for good, some said.

" Lori, your Eminence."

" Yes, I think that was his name."

This was a prevarication on the Cardinal's part, for Susan had told him so much that the name had remained imprinted on his memory.

" I'm told that he has gone away,—left Rome for good, your Eminence."

There was a moment's silence.

Then the agitation of the Cardinal was well covered by the brevity of his speech.

" Could you possibly find out when he left? If—if he left alone?"

"I will make it my business to find out, your Eminence. Yes, I think I can know in a few hours."

"Thanks."

Instinctively Vandegger felt that this visit of the Cardinal had something to do with Lady Susan. Was it possible that he, the Cardinal, loved her, as she once had said that she loved him? It had shocked him then—now it didn't shock him at all. His mind had travelled much since then, and the glove had taught him many things—most of all that there are mysteries in life which we cannot any of us unravel. Looking at the Cardinal covertly, as they discussed art and the present condition of the picture market, Vandegger felt no recoil at the idea of the Cardinal's affection for Lady Susan. She—she was above them all, a supernatural apparition, flitting across the incomprehensible disc of life, half phantom, half goddess; but the Cardinal had an honest face and was manly. They spoke of her as they might of an incomprehensible spirit which had visited them both, and which they both believed in.

As he was going, the Cardinal had pointed out the Sapho picture.

"You are going to send that to London?"

"I had thought . . . your Eminence."

"Oh well, yes, London's all right, the fog will cover a good deal, but——"

"If your Eminence thinks best, I will destroy it."

"No! Why should you?" The Cardinal shrugged his shoulders. "It's all right in London; but . . . I don't think that I'd leave it about here."

Vandegger followed the Cardinal downstairs. There was no carriage waiting, and Sapponi walked away with the gait that would have suited corduroy breeches or a kilt so much better than the priest's soutane.

At parting there had seemed to hover between them one of those common understandings which often exist where imagination alone supplies the bond.

By the evening Vandegger had heard the gossip of Rome, that Lady Susan had disappeared, and understood the Cardinal's anxiety to know if she had gone with Lori. This woman's personality—how it imprinted itself on everyone, even on those who hated her! And he, Vandegger, had learned to think of her with friendship, almost with pity, a pity inspired by the pathetic piteousness of the glove.

"Please, I want you always to be my friend."

How often those words had come back to him. Don Rinaldo did not seem to figure at all in the background of Lady Susan's picture. No one did. He himself, Vandegger, felt all the *impuissance* of a vague friendliness. The image of the Cardinal, alone, looked strong in the landscape which surrounded her, and the grace of the picture lay in the figures conjured up by Vandegger's brain—a company of the Guardia Nobile, standing with fixed bayonets, keeping back the Cardinal from approach to the central figure, Lady Susan. As captain of this company, Rinaldo might perhaps figure commandant of the troops, a man whose warlikeness had been restrained, and rendered lamblike, by an enforced religion ; gone through a species of chemical process which rendered the presentment of mystical things acceptable to the public, and which stultified originality and cramped impulse. As for the Cardinal, never since that day when Bianca had written to him that she had engaged herself to Lord Vermoyle had he felt quite like this. Even he, who never took even facts as an absolute certainty, because he always insisted on knowing the atmosphere which surrounded facts, yet jumbled circumstances in his own mind, and jumped to the conclusion that she had left Rome with Lori. It would be the worst of all if she had, and yet, after leaving Vandegger's studio, he felt guilty. He was too English at heart to be able to reassure himself by arguing with himself that it had been his duty. He felt guilty as a dog who has killed sheep, and can't get rid of the wool between his teeth.

He should have argued with her, made her go back to Don Rinaldo, or seen her sheltered for that night; now if she had gone with Lori, it was his fault. He grew bolder, more British and less Roman, as the day advanced. Once he said almost aloud, in ridiculously British accents,

"I've behaved like a cad."

Susan d'Ostia would have become more infatuated with him than ever, if she could have heard his soliloquies. She would have recognised the spirit she had always been telepathically in accord with.

He, Sapponi, the "Ludo" of Bianca Vermoyle, had thrown her child into the arms of Lori. It was the worst moment in Sapponi's life, because when Bianca threw him over, he had not felt guilty, only a victim of Fate; now he felt horribly guilty, and he could not even have the solace of confession. To no Cardinal or priest of Rome could he tell that he had lost the soul of Susan d'Ostia. Yet he had. As he re-entered his Palazzo he seemed to hear her taunting words,

"Can your Eminence tell me of one soul that you have saved?"

No, he couldn't. There were so many who assured him that their souls had been saved; he would not have owned to a certain indifference as to whether their souls were saved or not, but he did feel very strongly that Susan d'Ostia's soul had escaped him.

After dinner he grew taciturn and depressed. Where was the child ? What was she doing ? How was it that Rinaldo did not come to consult him ? He felt repudiated by the sentient hearts of Rome. How tame, how dull it was to belong to the syndicate of the Church ; there only isolation, individuality, offered the prospect of anything thrilling.

Was it then true that she had told Rinaldo what she said she had, namely, that she loved him, Sapponi ?

No man, be he priest or layman, can be utterly callous to the love of a woman, any woman. When the love was that of Lady Susan, it became like precious ointment, which, though the spilling of it may be a pity, yet cannot have an absolute market value. Cardinal Sapponi ate little that night, and Guiseppe was anxious about him.

After dinner he sat in the library and mechanically wrote letters : his secretary came and fetched them and went away with the impression that the Cardinal was perturbed. After he had gone, the Cardinal paced his room ; once he sat in the big armchair opposite that his sister had always occupied, once he buried his head in his hands, covering his weary eyes, weary with long nights of vigil and of reading and writing.

What if the papers were right ? What if she had gone with Lori ? What if, repudiated by him, weary, heart-sick, humiliated, she had acted on one of those impulses which were the hinges on which the sometimes open, sometimes closed, doors of her life seemed to swing ? What then ?

By seven o'clock Vandegger had read the papers, and heard the gossip at the club, and knew why the Cardinal wanted to know about Lori. By ten o'clock he had heard that Lori had left Rome the night before, accompanied by a lady ; neither had seen Rinaldo, therefore both of them jumped at the conclusion that Susan had left Rome the night before. Rinaldo could have told them that she had not left till dawn, but still there was no communication between the Palazzo d'Ostia and the Palazzo Sapponi. When Vandegger had told his tale and departed, taken his leave respectfully, yet with that touch of want of reverence which is peculiar to artists, even in the presence of social superiors, the Cardinal paced his library till a late hour of the night. To-night he could not work.

It was so like her to have done this, that was what made him suspect that she was the woman who had gone with Lori. He could imagine her going straight from his, the Cardinal's, house to Lori ; he could imagine almost what her idea would have been ; he could almost hear her speak her thoughts aloud, hear her say, "Well, if that's all you care about my soul, I'll show you what you've driven me to." She would have done it out of revenge, as well as from despair. If she had spoken, he could not more vividly have realised the passionate, scornful, revolting way in which she would utter the words to herself. Perhaps—he half smiled as he thought of it—perhaps she would send and tell him what she had done, to torture him, to punish him. Lori, good God! How she would repent of going with such a man. It was the most human moment Ludovico Sapponi had passed through since he had become a priest, this one to-night, when his flesh recoiled with horror at the thought of Susan under the protection of that man, and his soul cried out that he had driven her to this.

It had been seven when she left him. Why did the remembrance of that moment shape itself into the words, "When I sent her away, cast her out." And they, Lady Susan and Lori, had left Rome at midnight; what had she done during these five hours? Had she gone straight to him, or paced the streets, miserable, lonely, angry too? He could imagine that she loathed him, Sapponi, now perhaps, and had she come upon the man in the streets of Rome, and yielded to his entreaties because she was miserable and wretched?

He felt a hot wave of shame when he thought of how he had cast her out of his thoughts that night, ordered the lamps, and worked, and forgotten her while he wrote. And she? Hell had been closing in upon her, the human devil fastening upon her soul.

If there were souls he had saved, Lady Susan's was not amongst them; rather he had lost hers for her—and it was a human impulse which made him wish that he knew where she was to-night, that he could still rescue her.

What depths, what depths might she not yet fall to?

The same thoughts, with equal distress, if not of the same description, had filled the mind of Vandegger, yet neither had mentioned her name, the name of the woman whom, while they both judged, they yet could not but admire. She could never, Lady Susan, leave people indifferent, never, not even when they did not like her—and one of these men at least had been on the edge of loving her, escaped from it, or been unwilling to love her, knowing that she had no thought for him. She, Lady Susan Roach, and he, the painter man! How often her words had returned to him, though the bitterness they had once brought had passed from the remembrance of them.

"What, of you and me?"

The episode of her farewell letter, the discarded, forgotten glove, had wiped that out—all he remembered was that she had said,

"I want you always to be my friend," and he couldn't be, he did not know where to find her. If he did, if he could trace her out, what could he do? Kill Lori? What then? The very act would reawaken the busy tongues, cover her with piled-up shame, shame upon shame. Would she come away if he asked her? Perhaps not; she would laugh at him, own that she loved Lori, as she had confessed once—so shamelessly it had seemed to him then—that she loved His Eminence. And if she came back, where should she go? Would the Duc d'Ostia take her back? Never! Even His Holiness could not insist on that. No, the sadness of it all passed over him like the waves of a melancholy sea. Lady Susan must pass out of the minds of men and women; the smart world of Rome would know her no more.

Susan would have laughed had she known what they thought—those two—laughed from mischief and from gladness, because they didn't know.

But the thought which was most disturbing of all to the Cardinal, was the one that included Don Rinaldo. For the first time Sapponi was sincere with himself. He ought not to have married them—yet how could he have given a reason for not doing so? He was grateful that up till now Rinaldo had not come to find him. He didn't for a moment imagine that the young man believed what Lady Susan had told him, not at least so far as uniting him with her even in thought; but he could imagine that it would be a disagreeable step for the young man to come and talk it over with him, Cardinal Sapponi. Now another question was opened out. Was it his business to tell Rinaldo what he had heard? No, it was not his business.

It was so seldom that Ludovico Sapponi recoiled before his duty, that he seemed like a stranger to himself. Surely Lady Susan, if she had known the huge discomfort of her *Magnificenza* to-night, would have felt what she fancied her wrongs, in a small manner avenged. And yet, could she have seen into the mind of Julian Vandegger she would have read there that he had kept the compact, that he was always her friend.

The obliterating veil of the night fell over Rome: within the walls of the Vatican even His Holiness slept, just like other men,—the humanity of the Vicar of Christ, how different it is to the Bible tradition of the humanity of Christ Himself!—but it did not bring oblivion to those who had known Lady Susan. On the contrary, it seemed to throb with reminiscence, and for the most part reminiscence is tender, sifting the evil from the good, and wrenching out the evil. Rinaldo yearned for her bodily presence, only to see her lying there beside him, statuesque in her beauty of face and form, yet a living, breathing statue, sleeping in some graceful attitude, full of abandonment, childlike in the calm repose, yet the long fringe of her eyelashes throwing a fateful shadow on her cheek; the full, sweet arch lips, passionate and proud at once, presaging that she would wake a woman full-grown, denying the resemblance to death of her motionless sleep.

His Eminence, never had he thought about her as he thought to-night, never had she seemed so close to him, never had he so understood her. She loved him, and no woman must ever love him, the Cardinal of Rome; but had he stooped to be tenderly compassionate, he could have guided her back to the Palazzo d'Ostia.

To-night, for the first time, he understood the pity of the Christ for Mary Magdalene, and forgot, remembering it, the business of the Vatican. Love, life, death,—these defy the priest, the Pope, heaven and hell. He felt as if he stood encircled by flames, whose lashing tongues scorched his flesh, the while the imperviousness of the Church of Rome beckoned to him from distances. Hitherto love, life, death had beckoned to him from afar, and he had gazed upon them coldly; to-night the

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Vatican, the whole congress of Catholic authorities seemed to him like a business office. Lady Susan with Lori, the most notorious debauchee of Rome, Bianca's daughter one of the throng of the disowned, and he—he had cast her out.

It was the bitterest night of his life, more bitter than the night that Bianca had jilted him, because between the then and now, the flux and reflux of a myriad tides had raised him to a high plane, on which soul and conscience suffered as well as the heart, and the trinity of woe was more than he could stand.

And Vandegger, he too could not sleep for thinking of her in the arms of Lori. Oh! what demon possessed this girl of mingled blood, of conflicting races, that she should have done this thing? All night he paced his studio, stopping sometimes in front of the Sapho picture—holding the oil-lamp to it, as if he thought to find in the expression of her face, those far-away eyes, and that ever-present passionate, childlike, mutinous mouth, the answer to his feverish queries.

"How can I be her friend? Where can I find her? What can I do for her—oh! where is she, where is she?"

The thousand bells of Rome clanging out at midnight found them all awake, more terribly awake than they had ever been before, because they were alive to the horror of it all, each one conscious for the first time of the mightiness of her personality, of her soul's importance, of the impress she had left behind her.

How she would have laughed at them, all three, had she known it, lying in her pure, white bed, with Teddie curled up at her feet—laughed at the swaying of great trees bowed to the earth by the passing of the storm-child.

She might even have quoted to them the words of the Bible, which she knew so well and read so earnestly between French novels, in the words of King Solomon,

"Be not overwise."

CHAPTER IV

IT was ridiculous, of course. No one felt it more than Sledmere himself, but he could not get the image of Susan Roach out of his mind. For the next two days, sitting lazily reading the paper, breakfasting, lunching, dozing in the garden of the Spiezerhof, or more lazily still (for from sheer enjoyment of the scenery and freedom, he often sat down to rest without being tired), taking long walks in the neighbourhood, he caught himself continually wondering who she could be. Presently he came to the conclusion that he must have met her somewhere before. When he became convinced of this he almost worried about it, because if he had once met her and could find out where, it would make it so much more respectable his trying to meet her again.

It seemed ridiculous that no one could tell him, seeing that, unless she had disappeared in the mountains at the back, she must be living somewhere about; unless she had done this, and it would be quite his luck if she had, she could only get away by one of the little *dampfers*. This he knew she had not done, because he took care to be at the little landing-place every time one started. It was the only thing to do, he assured himself, this going to watch the going or coming crowd. At this time of the year he might come across any of his friends, even any of his numerous relations; he had never felt so friendly towards his relations as since he had come to Switzerland.

Robert, Earl of Sledmere, heir to the dukedom, now possessed—"rented" merely, he told people humorously—a life-lease only, by his aged uncle of Stirling, was bored to death in Switzerland because he loved his fellow-men, and adored his fellow-women in that delightful way which is only possible to an instinctively pure-minded man, who has a good mother and a large "covey" (this was his word again) of brothers and sisters. There must have been a great many sisters, for one was always hearing that so-and-so's wife had been Lady Isabel, or Lady Jane, or Lady Henrietta, or Lady Alice, or Lady Something-or-other Cary. These married sisters were his delight, because they all had such dear children; he was godfather to one child of each of his sisters. He had only two brothers, to whom he behaved splendidly, because he thought it such hard lines that he, Sledmere, was the eldest. He was bourgeois in his love for his family; he knew all that happened to each one, even when the Lady Henrietta lost her favourite maid; he had been employed by his sisters to do any sort of odd job. He had even engaged a nurse for Lady Jane's first baby, and he had spoken seriously to the husband of Lady Alice, who neglected her.

"That perfect dear Sledmere," was the way everyone spoke of him, and his coming amongst them was one of the rhapsodies in the life of each one of his nephews and nieces. He also had three aunts, and it was the fault of one of these aunts, Aurelia, that he was in Switzerland. She had tried to marry him to Lord Listowel's daughter, and, nice as she was—such a dear, pretty girl and so clever—he didn't want to marry Lord Listowel's daughter. She was so well off, and so pretty that he felt quite sure that it wasn't cruel of him not to want to marry her, as she could marry anyone. He couldn't after all, marry more than one woman, and so many people had suggested choosing wives. It seemed the best thing to do to go away for a bit. He wasn't a bit conceited, and he meant to marry one day, but he really thought that without offending any of them when he did, he might please himself. Thinking of his dear mother, and of his father, who had been sternly unimpressive as compared with his mother, he had come to the conclusion that only a good girl would please him—a well brought up, thoroughly nice girl, who must also be pretty. The Carys all loved beauty—beauty and music and flowers.

They all knew something about gardening, so the flowers had to be of the best. The music didn't matter so much, almost any would do; the stirring patriotic kind was particularly welcome, and Scotch and Irish airs. As for the beauty, it had to be refined, as a rule, but Sledmere had been known to admire an actress once. This had distressed his mother for a time, and there had been many family discussions over it, but Sledmere himself had never had the slightest idea of marrying her. His flirtation with her had been of the mildest, and remained always a pleasant memory to the actress, because of the delicacy with which it had been carried on.

A pure-minded, healthy-minded race, the Carys,—tall in body, and good-looking; and Sledmere and his mother possessed of more brains than the rest. Naturally, such a family detested scandals; there had been very few, but one incident which had happened when Sledmere was quite a boy had remained imprinted on his memory. It was when a first cousin of his, a lovely girl, had been divorced: all the family except his mother had turned their backs upon her, and he remembered his mother saying:

"It's all very well, everyone blaming poor Louise, but we don't know everything about it; she's very good-looking and very young, and he—well, I never liked him. I shall certainly go and see the poor thing."

It had been his first lesson in broadmindedness, when he was twenty-three; now he was thirty-three, and he had broadened a good deal. He was indeed what everyone called him—"a charming fellow." But he was too gregarious to enjoy this solitude; in a way it was rather absurd his flying from England, when so many people wanted him to stay with them, beginning by one of the royalties, and ending by his youngest brother, who had just married "such a dear, pretty little girl" with no money.

As a matter of fact, he had come away to think it over, to see if he could please them all by marrying Lady Rose Lathom. He had been told by his eldest sister, the sensible, interfering one, that he would be accepted. He never thought of his eligibility, and he felt quite grateful to the girl for being ready to marry him, but. . . Of course, she was a charming girl, any man would be proud to marry her, but. . . . He didn't know that the "but" meant that she wasn't pretty enough, also that unconsciously he was seeking quite a particular kind of woman. Like so many men who have no special talent, he admired clever women immensely. Lady Rose had not struck him as particularly clever, though she rode beautifully.

The beauty of Switzerland was quite a revelation to him, because he so rarely came abroad, but there was a great sameness about it, he thought. Presently, he declared to himself that he had seen bits of Scotland that were just as fine. The congress of cosmopolitans—of French, Russians, Poles, Germans and Americans he came across, filled him with that half-pitying, half-contemptuous, amused wonder with which the Britisher looks on every nation but his own.

"Really, quite a nice chap, a gentleman too." He had expressed himself thus in a letter about a German prince he had met and talked to, one evening on his travels. The interview had left an impression of astonishment that it should be so, while he was quite ignorant of the fact that he had been talking to one of Europe's greatest men—a diplomat and a statesman, who, a few years later, controlled the destiny of Europe during a political crisis. But he was bored to death. He had tried talking to a pretty little widow staying at the hotel, and played with her little girl, for he was passionately fond of children ; then she had frightened him by becoming too chummy, and he took refuge in long walks.

He was awfully sorry for the poor dog, but it did seem a fortunate thing for him when, on the third day of his stay, just as he was trying to make up his mind to go bravely back to England, and yet not to marry Lady Rose, he should come face to face with the girl-woman who so interested him.

He was sitting on the cooler side of the hotel, and fuming inwardly at a ridiculous letter written to the *Times* on the agricultural question by a man who was too evidently not a landowner, when the yelping cry of pain of a dog rent the air, and a girlish voice exclaimed,

"Oh, my poor Teddie!"

Already a little gaping, useless, inquisitive crowd of peasants and waiters and scullions from the hotel had gathered round the tall, graceful figure, while the solitary policeman of the neighbourhood, bursting beneath his uniform, with an appearance which conveyed the impression that to have become so fat either there were no crimes committed in the neighbourhood, or that the pursuit of them was a healthy exercise, was interrogating the perspiring carter whose vehicle had run over Teddie's foot. Finding that he could not fix the blame on his countryman,—who by-the-bye was carrying barrels of beer to the restaurant at Aeschi, and what might not be the outcome of being lenient with him?—he approached Lady Susan, suggesting that it would be, amongst other things, advisable to kill the dog.

The look of scorn with which she met this suggestion, the brave way in which she lifted Teddie in her arms, regardless of the blood that dripped on to her dress, filled Sledmere

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with admiration, while the word "English" registered itself in a snapshot fashion on his brain. At this juncture he felt that it would not be unseemly to offer his services, and raising his hat, he suggested that he should carry Teddie into the hotel.

"Never mind, angel."

This was what Susan was whispering into Teddie's ear as he approached her.

"Oh thanks, it's very good of you, but I'm afraid that he might bite; he isn't really savage at all, but he doesn't like strangers."

This was what she said to him, and the word "stranger" chilled his ardour.

She carried the heavy burden into the hotel, and the manager came forward with an alacrity which showed that he knew her to be a personage. She had stayed here, as a matter of fact, some weeks back, when she had been looking for a *châlet*, only she had not registered herself Duchessa d'Ostia, but Marchesa del Val—no one was ever to find her, that was part of the self-imposed programme, after being cast out by the Cardinal, and after running away from Rinaldo.

Briefly, thinking only of the dog, she asked for water and a cloth, and with Sledmere standing by her, proceeded to bathe the maimed foot. Now and then, Teddie, silenced by her attentions, licked her hand.

Now the manager drove off the crowd, and

Susan settled herself on the seat in the porch beside the dog.

"I don't think it's very bad. I wonder if he'd let me examine it?"

"He might; it would be good of you. I do so want to know if anything's broken."

She held the dog's muzzle with her two hands, while he examined the foot.

Teddy behaved admirably, though he yelped and drew back his foot with rapid sensitiveness.

"It isn't broken, but there's a nasty cut, you see, here, between the toes. I think we ought to bandage it. May I do it? I know how."

He looked into her face smiling, and his smile reassured her.

"This is all I've got." She held out a tiny piece of batiste which, in foreign fashion, had a ducal coronet on it.

"I don't think it's quite strong enough." Sledmere laughed; that peculiar laugh of the chivalrous man, who likes the fallals of women, but who scoffs at them good-naturedly.

"I wonder if they've got some old linen in the house."

"I think I can get something."

Sledmere disappeared and came back with two of his own handkerchiefs; the large handkerchiefs of a man, the good Irish linen used by a man of fashion and means.

"Oh, but I don't like to take them." Rapidly her beauty was subjugating him.

"I've got three others upstairs."

"Only three!"

They laughed together.

"I thought I had a dozen."

"Oh, I'm always buying new dozens; isn't it wonderful the way one loses them?"

She ceased to protest, as he bound up Teddie's foot carefully and skilfully—tenderly, even.

"Never mind, old boy; there, that's better. Now you're all right."

"It's awfully good of you."

There was something almost boyish in Susan's awkwardness as she thanked him.

"Of course she's English," was his inward comment. He glanced, without knowing that he did so, at her tailor-made gown.

Then she looked at her watch.

"It's particularly tiresome, because I wanted to get to Beatenberg to-day, just opposite, you know. My maid went there yesterday with the chauffeur, and she sprained her foot and couldn't get back, and I wanted to go over and see her. I suppose the best thing I could do would be to telephone to the *châlet* for someone to come and fetch him—he'll have to go back in the motor—only I do hate leaving him so, yet I suppose I oughtn't to desert a human being for a dog. My chauffeur's devoted to him; I know he'll be good to him, but I feel such a brute deserting him." She got up to go and telephone.

"Stay there, Teddie."

The dog had made a movement to accompany her. Sledmere rose too.

He wasn't at all bold, as a rule, but the episode, coming on the dulness, interested him.

"I don't see really——" he spoke dreadfully seriously, and the perfect gentlemanlikeness, even his rather bronzed complexion, pleased her.

"Why can't you leave the dog here till you come back?"

He spoke to her exactly as he spoke at family councils, those endless family councils that the Carys always had about everything which concerned each other. In the same voice he had said,

"If Randolph wants to marry the girl" (Randolph was his youngest brother), "I really don't see why we can't manage to let them have something, just to start them. Upon my word, I don't see why I shouldn't allow him five hundred a year,—she's a dear little girl."

"Do you think I could? Of course he'd be all right at home, but I'm afraid Adolphe will have gone out. I told him he could." She gave a light laugh. "I expect he's going by the boat too (he's engaged to my maid), and I walked here just to give Teddie a run, poor old dog. I wish I hadn't, but he'll think it so mean of me to desert him."

The American adjective startled Sledmere. She had no accent, therefore why use the word "mean"?

"Won't your maid think it still meaner?"

"Yes, I suppose she would, and she's such a dear—been with me for years; only hotel servants, the Swiss, don't you know, haven't the same idea of animals that we have" (the "we" made her English).

"I assure you that he shan't be a moment with the servants. I'll take him up to my room."

"Oh, but I couldn't really——"

"I assure you that I like to have him; I've been awfully dull here and, well, I'm not sure that I ever appreciated poodles, but I love dogs, and—and he's not exactly like a poodle. I mean, of course, he's very well-bred, but he's such a nice dog, and he ought to have his foot bathed again in a couple of hours. If the wound wasn't so open, I'd suggest arnica, but I've got a bottle of Condy's fluid upstairs, my sister made me bring it. I'll bathe the foot again presently."

He took out his watch.

"The boat goes in seven minutes—I assure you——"

Susan shot him one of those all-encompassing glances, which had been the undoing of so many men. "I really don't know how to thank you." Inwardly she was saying that he was almost as nice as an American man.

"He'll want some dinner, something light. The manager knows me. Please tell him to put it down to me. I don't think that he ought to have anything but bread and milk, do you? Or fish, if they'll take all the bones out; he loves fish, or some bread and soup. Do you think soup would hurt him?"

"I'll see that he has all he wants." Sledmere took out his watch. "You've only five minutes. I'm afraid I can't come, if I've got to stay with him."

"Oh, it's too good of you. Good-bye, angel." She stooped and kissed the dog. "Be good, I'm coming back soon," and Susan rushed out of the hotel, leaving behind her the impression on Sledmere that while she was grateful to him for his kindness, she had always been accustomed to the homage of men.

All day he stayed with the dog. Once or twice the manager came and talked with him, letting fall the scant information he had about her, and though devoured by curiosity, Sledmere would ask no questions. What the man volunteered was quite enough. She was very rich, and her servants adored her. It had leaked out that the name she had registered under was not her own, or at least not the ultimate one to which she could aspire. Her servants had let slip *Madame la Duchesse* when they spoke to her. Once the maid had said *Miladi*. He, the manager, fancied that she was royalty travelling incognito. It wasn't at all unlikely, seeing that an archduchess of Austria had lived for a month in his hotel as Frau Schmidt. It was strange, though, that one so young should have no husband, no father, no one with her.

Sledmere didn't care at all if she were royalty, but he was glad that she spoke King's English, that was the great thing; glad, too, without knowing what his feelings were, that she was not less than she had seemed to him. He didn't remember having seen anyone so *soigné* in appearance, hair and throat, teeth and finger tips. There was only one woman he had ever known who could touch her—and that was the actress.

He fed Teddie and bathed his foot, and gave him a run on the grass of the garden, so that the pebbles shouldn't hurt him. Later he took him on his lap, though he had always despised poodles—all other dogs too—and he waited happily for the five o'clock boat from Beatenberg.

CHAPTER V

NATURALLY, the incident of the day drew them together. It would have done so, even if there had not been the huge sympathy between them, which exists between those who have the right of way. She had brought back Joséphine, and Adolphe, who had possessed his soul in patience since his beloved mistress was going to see to Joséphine, met them with the motor as they landed from the ship, Susan helping the limping maid as she came along the wooden bridge.

"You and Teddie will look quite alike," Lady Susan said to Joséphine in French, "only you have Adolphe to look after you, and *ce cher* Teddie has no one but me."

The manager rushed to the side of the motor, but Lady Susan sprang from it. She must thank this unknown man.

"I never knew such a well-behaved dog." There was something wistful in Sledmere's eyes, as he handed the dog to her.

She was sick of adventure, yet this Englishman had introduced new blood into her life. She owed him something for his care of Teddie. Yet the present mood of Lady Susan did not prompt her, as it would have done some months earlier, to follow up the acquaintance made under such unusual circumstances. It was Sledmere who asked,

"May I pay my patient a visit to-morrow, and see how he is getting on?"

And it was in the likeness of the old Lady Susan that she answered,

"Oh, certainly, if you care to."

"I live at the Villa des Alpes, just before you get to Aeschi. I believe one can see a tiny bit of the roof from your hotel, but anyone can tell you the way."

She had had an impulse to offer to send her motor for him, then restrained it, and for a second the remembrance of the events of the past weeks rushed upon her, bringing such a grave, almost terrified, look to her face, that Sledmere feared that he had been too bold, that she was annoyed.

Now she took leave of him rather hurriedly. After they had started, he stood and watched the back of the motor in its cloud of summer dust; then he walked back into the hotel. For the rest of the evening he felt worried, and went over the incident in his mind.

Ought he to have waited till she asked him, before going to her house? Had he been ill-bred, taken too much advantage of this accident in order to press his acquaintance upon her?

He felt dreadfully awkward about it, while he was perfectly certain that if he had not suggested it himself, he would never have seen her again. She would, of course, never have asked a man to her house who had not been properly introduced, he felt certain of that. He no longer hid from himself that he was immensely interested in her.

Later, when he was dressing for dinner, he remembered what she had said about a tiny bit of roof of her *châlet* being visible. For a long time he scanned the roofs of the houses dotted here and on the slopes of the hillside beyond. It was impossible to tell which was hers. Finally he fixed upon the wrong one, and was contented for the rest of the evening. By the next morning all his doubt and hesitation had passed away.

As for Lady Susan, the long, hot day had wearied her, as everything lately wearied her, bringing that moral lassitude of the mind, which in time re-acts on the body. The old vitality was dormant, if not dead; the spring and rush which had been hers had gone out of her life. It was empty, piteously empty for one so young.

She dined out in the garden, with Teddie sitting on three legs on a chair beside her, holding up his fourth bandaged one, then trying at times to stretch it on to the table, when he coveted some morsel of food.

She had forgotten all about the good-looking Englishman, but all her own sorrows rushed in upon her. The Italian servant brought cigarettes and matches and placed them on a little iron table by the side of her lonely chair, but she left them untouched. Her hands clasped behind her head, she looked out desolately on to the landscape as the darkness enveloped it, seeming to come from everywhere, to rise from the lake, to descend from the sky, and to steal from behind hills and forest trees, the world caught in a soft dark net, which deepened every instant in hue, from amethyst and olive green, to purple, to black almost, drawn closer by an invisible hand.

And the "star-fire" brought no gladness, as the sky cleared beneath its brilliancy. Once she mused aloud,

"I can't bear it."

Yonder the house itself was silent, and all around silence seemed to display itself, a living, sentient thing, speechless, mysterious, yet meaning, uttering things unheard. This awful silence, this awful loneliness, must it go on for ever?

It seemed most wonderful of all that to her, Susan Roach, this should have happened.

"Oh, how awful, how awful," she whispered once. Still, to-night she thought she could not have done otherwise, being herself, than do as she had done. "I've sown my wild oats, I had to," was one thought. "I would not have done those things I did, but . . . Oh, why couldn't they understand?"

She hardly knew herself what she had wanted them to understand—vaguely, confusedly, almost. She meant that they should have seen that she, Susan, had to do differently, to *live*; that they all made too much fuss about it all—idiots! That they should have understood what lay underneath, what she felt to exist, not judged her words and actions, but what inspired them. They had taken her too seriously, even her *Magnificenza*: with one word of tenderness he might have made her patient—made her go back to Rinaldo.

She still fancied that she loved Sapponi, that he would be the love of her life.

Go back to Rinaldo!

She grew restless, agitated at this thought. She sat up in her chair.

Go back to Rinaldo!

Even that seemed preferable to this living death.

Go back to Rome, go back to it all, to the life of a great lady, without seeing her *Magnificenza* any more. The dual nature in her suggested that even from such a life sensation might be filched. She saw herself for an instant in a vision of her mind, courted, admired, respected, yet cold and impervious, because of the silent grief feeding within her breast. Once more the child in her, dressed up and made-believe in the garbs of woe, of secret mysterious woe, then the new self, reasserted itself. She was weary of comedy, seeking at last, although still unaware of it, something human, sincere, real; seeking calm, peace. Already, young as she was, the volcanoes of life were dying, had been consumed too quickly, by the ardour within them, the vitality of the atmosphere she had conjured up, and then . . . She had reached the deeper wonder of whether that was what she ought to do; unlike Lady Susan, that. Then, half with humour, half with the daring realisation of the horror of the thought, the words, her own, yet seeming like the voice of someone else,

"He wouldn't take me back."

She stood up, as if to give room to her thought. Was it possible that she had nowhere to go? How absurd and terrible it sounded. She, Susan Roach, an outcast! For an instant the Cardinal's last words, "Go! Go!" sounded as if they had been a curse. In those words he had thrust her out of the Church, out of Rome, out of society. What had possessed her to tell Rinaldo? Why did words which destroyed her, always come to her lips at the wrong moment? Why couldn't one say things just as they rose to one's brain, be sincere, admitting others into the confidence of transient moods, without one's words meaning so much, remaining so indelibly written on the minds of others? She forgot the impressive, passionate way in which she gave out her thoughts, recklessly bestowing the knowledge of her wild, mad impulses.

Her mother, Bianca, how vividly she reappeared in her memory now, seeming closer than she had ever been. Much in the same way she had destroyed her own life, and left its shadow as her child's inheritance.

October ! The lucky month, some said, yet the storm month.

The words of the poem she had recited to the Cardinal came back to her mind. That night, when she had told him that she was bad, why hadn't he taken all she said more seriously, since he had taken her passion seriously ? All men seemed so weak, and she had been seeking the strong man, who would lead her, crush her. For such a man she would have died. Was it possible, then, that they were all weak, unable to deal with the soul and heart of a woman, even if they understood the methods of the body ? Was it possible, then, that all a woman's duty was to comfort, to soothe, to satiate, yet to remain herself for ever unsatisfied, misunderstood, a case of hidden perceptions and emotions which no man could reach ? Rinaldo . . . was he very unhappy ? For the first time she thought of him, her boy husband, who seemed such years, years younger. What if she went back to him, entreated him to take her back ? Would he ? Yes, if she told him that she had ceased to care for the Cardinal, or had never loved him . . . that it had been a joke. It would be a lie, but apparently women had to lie all their lives ; lie and deceive, if there was to be any peace.

She gave a sigh of despair at the thought of it, yet if she could compass it, there seemed nothing else to do but to return to Rinaldo. How should she set about it ? Write to him ? He would perhaps not answer. Her father,—was it likely that he would help her, seeing that he hardly knew her, that she had asked neither him nor her brother to the wedding, said nothing till all was over ? There had been something ominous in the silence of both of them, yet they, too, had they troubled about it, could have helped her. The coldness of the world chilled her. All of them, all of the humans, how ignorant they seemed of the vibrating undercurrents which coursed unseen within the being of each fellow human ! The Cardinal, Rinaldo, Figi, her father, her brother, Vandegger—even old Prym—what dry sticks they seemed ! Was it possible that they knew nothing of undercurrents ? If so, how dull their lives must be ! Once more the former Lady Susan's spirits returned. How tame, how colourless they all seemed, apart from the glowing fire of existence ; doing nothing wrong, yet apparently achieving nothing great, with righteousness.

"If only they did something magnificent with all their calm goodness."

She gave a low chuckle as she thought of how she had derided the Cardinal and Rome.

"I bet he didn't like that . . . but it was true."

Then another thought arose, swept over her with sudden force, as if somewhere a windstorm had arisen.

"Could I stand the life with them for ever and ever?"

"Too much cold storage." She spoke to herself again, in the slang of the American days, and the image of her American lover stood before her. He had come nearer to understand her than any; none, none but the Americans understood women. Why had she let him go? She had been moving in a trance then, bewitched by her surroundings, stultified by the stateliness of it all, and now she saw that the sweetness of life had been close to her,—the rugged simplicity of the love of a denizen of a new country, unhampered by tradition and the corruption of civilisation, untouched by the demoralisation of decadence. Dear Morton! She thought of him now with tenderness; her whole inner being was craving for saneness, for wholesome living. Her wild oats had been sown, now she demanded the heritage of a woman's reserve and patience, and it was denied her.

She could see it all now, how it ought to be—had to be, as life is. The wild oats didn't pay—not if this was the end of them.

The hour grew late, and Joséphine, limping lovingly around her mistress's room, wondered when she would come.

"Ce n'est pas une vie, ça," she muttered to herself now and then. Adolphe was in the garage tinkering at the motor. The Swiss housemaid had gone to bed, and the Italian butler was playing cards with the cook. None of them had thoughts as sad and as whimsical as the young Duchess d'Ostia, who had burned all her ships.

Now and then a nauseating longing, a species of home-sickness, not for one home, but for any but this one, came over her, while a hundred projects, a hundred ideas, flitted across her active brain. Should she do as he, her *Magnificenza*, had said—go into a nunnery? She laughed softly to herself.

"They'd expel me in a week—the dears. Fresh scandal!" If she wrote to her, would old Prym come and stay with her?

Oh, how boring, a life spent in trying to make Prym put on the right clothes at the same time. She laughed mischievously to herself at the thought of how useful Prym had been without knowing it.

No, she didn't want any of them. She wanted something new, but not boring. She couldn't be bored, she refused to be; it killed her to be bored. Yet had she ever been bored like this? Never!

All the country around became dead with sleep, with silence; the lights had all gone out in the distant cottages and farmhouses, but still she lingered on. Deep thought had caught her as in a vice: she wanted to think it all out. The last weeks, motoring from place to place feverishly, the uncertainty, had been like a nightmare, and to-night she had come to some agreement with herself. She felt strong enough for this to-night. The cool air fanned her softly, and brought comfort and soothing, after the hot, agitated day.

She must come to an understanding with herself to-night. Life was becoming intolerable. If the worst came to the worst, she would go back to America; they would make much of her there. Instinctively she felt that she had gone beyond America,—it would seem crude now, after the finish and polish of Roman life. "I've tasted of the fruit of the tree of knowledge," she said to herself maliciously. "I couldn't go back to the dear old Eden." Suddenly, fiercely, she longed for the great world, to be received, courted, petted by her own class.

"I've got to have them; they've got to have me." An awful thought was, "Will they receive me?"

"With Rinaldo, yes, without—no!" Rinaldo became an important personage on her horizon.

How funny it was that Rinaldo should have become of such importance. She had never considered him at all. She had married him to wring the Cardinal's heart, and apparently the Cardinal had no heart to wring. . . . Oh, yes, he had, if he would only let it beat. But he wouldn't, so Rinaldo, who had been all this time an insignificant knave, became a trump card. Was there anything so funny as the ups and downs of life? The thought strengthened and shaped itself. Somehow she must get back to Rinaldo, and the only way—she waited a long time to confess it even to herself—the only way was through her *Magnificenza*. What a tame ending,—to write to him and say, "Please get my husband to take me back."

Evidently all the endings were tame of a woman's life. Unless—unless . . . they sank and sank. . . . Instinctively, she recoiled against being classed amongst the women who sank.

She would have to rise again by the rungs of the common ladder of respectability. Oh, how dull!

Underlying everything was a deep conviction that it would be easy to be respectable, enveloped beneath a great love. She challenged life to send her such love. It couldn't, she knew it couldn't. She didn't believe that it had such a thing to offer except in dreams.

"Poor Rinaldo!"

She rose now from her seat. That was the only thing to do. Decision brought comfort and purpose, and renewed ambition: she must eat humble pie and write to the Cardinal, and ask him to see Rinaldo. The piteousness of the ending sickened her. . . The lace scarf hanging to her arm trailed to the ground, and drew softly over the damp grass, as she took her way back to the house. Once she stooped her head down to a rose-tree, inhaling the fragrance from the flower, whose colour was no longer distinguishable. As she neared the house she quickened her pace.

"Oh, poor Joséphine, she ought to have gone to bed early. What a cruel beast I am!"

When she entered the bedroom Joséphine almost started at the look on her face. Her eyes, her whole face, were aflame with new resolve, and something supernatural rested on them, as if she had borrowed a gleam from the stars.

"Oh, ma pauvre Joséphine, pardon."

There was a wonderful charm, a magnetic charm in her to-night, stronger than there had ever been before.

"Il faudra rentrer à Rome," she said once aloud, smiling, yet half musing.

" En effet, miladi, c'est ce qu'il y a de mieux à faire."

Susan laughed.

It wasn't *mieux*, it was the only thing left to do. When Joséphine at last limped out of the room, Susan sat down at a table and wrote to Cardinal Sapponi.

Wisely she ignored the last interview.

" DEAR LORD CARDINAL," she wrote,

" I am anxious to return to my husband. I have had some time to think, and I feel that it is what I ought to do. May I entreat of your Eminence to see him for me and to tell me what to do ?

" Yours respectfully,
" SUSAN D'OSTIA."

Never since she left Rome had she slept so peacefully as she slept that night, with Teddie curled up at her feet.

The humiliation of defeat was lost in the prospect of an ending to the dreariness of the situation.

CHAPTER VI

THE fact that she had written to the Cardinal had the effect on Susan d'Ostia of restoring some of her former gaiety, almost of her recklessness. She had not yet, in her undying optimism, stopped to wonder or doubt, to ask herself if the Cardinal would help her, or if Rinaldo would take her back. Thinking of the American man, her thoughts about Rinaldo were,

"If he cares for me, he'll be only too glad to have found me."

She was unaware herself of how dimmed was the glow of passion she had felt for the Cardinal.

Thus Sledmere found her, full of vivacity, when he arrived to see to Teddie's foot, and was taken to her in the garden.

He was too well-bred to put inquisitive questions, yet he elicited a great deal from her.

"You see my mother was only partly Italian," she said once, "my father is English," but she did not tell him who her father was, "and then I was brought up in America."

All this information he stored away as if it were of importance. He felt the sense of gratitude—peculiar to the Englishman—to the gods at learning that she was not entirely foreign.

"Do you know I felt perfectly certain when I saw you on the boat that you were English."

"I'm not sure that I take that quite as a compliment . . . You see——" she hesitated. "I'm not very fond of the English, they're so cold; at least, those I know have been."

"Oh, now do you think so? Don't you think that we are very reserved, that we are only rather ashamed of showing what we feel?"

Susan's face took on a musing expression. She seemed to see her brother's handsome face before her, that morning at the Palazzo Sapponi, the last on which she had seen him. Why had he allowed her to stay in Rome, given in to her pleading? Was it from love that he had done as she wished, or from want of love?

"I don't know." She spoke a little absently. Lines she had often read, for her passion for poetry remained undiminished, floated through her brain; those words of Shakespeare, the fullness of which, the verity and the philosophy and the grace, so often reveal themselves to us only after we have read them for many years; not perhaps in many cases till after we have seen life's illustrations of them.

. . . . . . Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever fixèd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken.

"Looks on tempests——"

The humorous vein within her gave inward reminder of its presence, and the thought expressed itself in slang.

"They've looked on the tempests all right."

Then something clutched at her heart.

The "ever fixèd mark"—all of them, it struck her, had gone away, recoiled before the tempests of her youth, deserted her in the hour of storm. The ever fixèd mark; she couldn't see it anywhere. . . The next thought gave the semblance of a laugh to her words, though she did not express it.

"An ever fixèd mark. . . rather boring."

Rinaldo for the moment outlined himself in her mind's vision as the nearest approach to a "fixèd mark."

"I'm not sure, I don't think the English are of the through-fire-and-water kind of people——"

"Oh well, perhaps you haven't asked any of them to go through fire and water."

"No, I haven't." She gave a little contemptuous laugh that was almost harsh, and which for an instant revealed to him that there must be somewhere an underlying bitterness.

"I've never asked anything of an Englishman." On her lips almost were the words: "I've always had to give them something."

Instead she smiled.

" Except perhaps to look after Teddie."

" And you didn't ask me that you know. . . . I offered."

" So good of you ! "

" Oh, I enjoyed it, and I must say he's a wonderful dog. Upon my word, I don't think I ever saw such a clever dog."

Susan's face brightened, and for the next few moments she was busy telling him stories of Teddie's intelligence. " You see," she ended, " that's the beauty of animals, of dogs and horses, and all animals. They've no national traits, they're so cosmopolitan, so international, aren't they, in character ; always true, wherever you meet them, just the same, and so forgiving ; they understand one so, don't they ? "

Sledmere agreed with her, yet the words from so young a girl (he still imagined her unmarried—perhaps some old duenna sat within at this moment, and eyed them from behind the window curtains) gave him an impression of sadness, and his next words indirectly expressed his thoughts.

" Don't you—don't you find it rather dull up here all by yourself ? "

" Dull ? I should think I do. . . but. . . Well I've got to be somewhere you know, and I suppose if you've got to be alone, it doesn't much matter where you are . . . and—and this is beautiful, isn't it ? "

Her eyes swept over the landscape lovingly, and Sledmere had an opportunity of watching her profile for an instant,—the way the rich tinted hair waved over the tips of the delicate ears; the mobile, sensitive, passionate lips, which if they ever yielded themselves for an instant, would withdraw themselves again, delicately, reticently, half ashamed of the yielding, and the delicate rose-pink of the skin with a glow upon it as if touched by sunset, except where the leaves of a vine threw shadows on it.

Teddie had long been attended to, and had thrown himself into a cool, dark corner in a flower bed, half crushing a border of pansies in order to take advantage of the sheltered corner which the leaves protected from the sun. A little evening breeze, little more than a whisper of air, lifted the tiny, half wavy, half curly, fronds of hair from her broad, low brow, the brow of a madonna, covering the brain of a siren. He doesn't know that he is telling himself that he has never seen a woman at all to approach her; still less does he know that he is at once fascinated by and afraid of her beauty, while something Bohemian, and artistic, poetic—there is no name to give to what he feels, since it is so mingled and unusual,—appeals to him in the situation. Another man than Sledmere would have taken advantage of the adventure of it all. Sledmere only says to himself, "Poor child, how on earth is it that she's here alone? It's a beastly shame, upon my word it is, to leave a young girl of this age alone in Switzerland." He has an intense desire to look after her, coupled with the chivalrous fear of doing her any harm by his presence.

His next remark is a feeler, though he doesn't know it, and harks back to the Calvinism of his father's upbringing.

"There's no Anglican church about here, is there?"

She turns on him almost fiercely, but her tone is only gently deriding,

"I always think that's such a funny word—'Anglican.' I suppose it's because I've got the word 'Episcopal' so fixed in my American mind." She gives a little laugh, then remembering Rinaldo, and that she is a married woman, she tells him soberly,

"I don't know. You see I'm a Catholic, but I believe that there's an English church; I don't know if it's Anglican——" this with a touch of mischief, "at St. Beatenberg—but it's Protestant. . . How would that do?"

It is a decided shock to him that she is Catholic. It is only a hundred years, less than the span of life of a father and son, since they burnt a woman for a witch in New England. It is not thirty years since the House of Commons resisted Disraeli because he was a

Jew; and [redacted]'s people are inherently Protestant, and he feels as if a gulf has arisen between him and this girl. All the mysteriousness of Rome has arisen suddenly between him and this "child" as he calls her to himself, although there are only eleven years between them; the mysteriousness which exists mainly in the mind of the Protestant, and against the grotesqueness of which all Catholicism hurls itself in the accession oath of our Sovereigns of Great Britain, which is mediaeval in its hide-boundness. And he shivers inwardly.

Some ancestral heritage of fear makes him feel as if he must not linger here, must hurry away. . . . And she, detecting his thoughts beneath his silence, turns towards him with a merry laugh.

"Don't look so horrified. I'm only an American Catholic, and that, you know, isn't offensively or aggressively Catholic at all. . . . The fact is, that I'm afraid I'm not at all devout. Of course I think that there are some wonderful things in the Catholic Church; the beauty of it is that they do all your thinking for you, and—yes, I suppose confession is a relief at times."

She grows absent for a moment as she recalls her brief discussion on this subject with her *Magnificenza*, when he told her that she must confess before the sacrament of marriage, and she uttered the words:

“Haven't I confessed enough [illegible] you?”

She remembers, with a certain satisfaction, how he left her question unanswered, and married her by special dispensation.

“He couldn't answer me,” she says triumphantly to herself; then she goes on: “But I always forget my crimes when I'm kneeling at the confessional, only one has to make up something.”

He laughs too. It is a relief to him to find that she is not a bigot, while he is vaguely conscious of the fact that she is not serious enough, that if she is a Catholic she ought to be a devout one. He is not virulently religious, but the Carys have always been “churchy” and reproachingly awed by Romanism, while fascinated by its counterfeit in the Anglican church. He remembers that a family discussion about a screen in a very high West End church, had rather disgusted him—while the remembrance of several hymns he loves, rushes through his brain. One is “Nearer my God to Thee,” another is “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” and he is devoted to “Lead, Kindly Light.” He has always joined in it, in a not unmusical voice, but with unmusical knowledge, whenever it has been sung when he was present. But the Carys have never sifted deeply enough to be able to hold their own with other creeds, and having heard that she is a Catholic, good taste forbids his discussing the subject. And he is thankful for an inspiration.

"I suppose you've seen the Beatushoehle?"

His voice, his whole manner, seems to distance them miles from each other.

"No, do you know, I haven't. I've thought of it, but it is so dull going to these places by one's self. Servants, of course—I'm devoted to my maid, she's been years and years with me; she's engaged to my chauffeur, but can't make up her mind about marrying him—a good thing for me, isn't it, that she doesn't? for I suppose they'd "go to housekeeping," as they say in the States, and I'd lose them,—but they never share one's enthusiasms, do they? They're interested in everything except the one thing one is interested in one's self; always say some awful platitudes which chill one's very marrow, or admire the one thing that is hideous. . . . Joséphine's a dear, but she has no imagination, and imagination's half the thing, isn't it?"

"I wish you'd let me take you there."

"Oh, it's very good of you; I'd like awfully to go."

The Anglo-American in her dispels all the mists of foreignism and Catholicism which have arisen between them, and he feels relieved, like a boy let loose from school.

She is to meet him at the "*Dampfschiff*," outside his hotel to-morrow afternoon. It goes at four something . . . . he isn't quite sure of the hour, but he will telephone her, if she has a telephone. . .

"Oh, yes," she laughs merrily. "Do you imagine that an American woman"—he feels a fleeting wonder at the fact that she does not say "an American girl"—"could possibly exist without a telephone?"

He'll telephone the exact hour.

"I believe we can get tea at a *châlet* somewhere near there."

"Oh, never mind about tea."

She isn't aware of the fact that he knows perfectly that they will be late for dinner if they don't go to the Beatushoehle till the four something or other; that they may lose it altogether, and that he is going to try and persuade her to dine somewhere, anywhere, either at the restaurant of the Beatushoehle, beneath the pine-trees, and where the rushing water-fall deadens the sound of knives and forks and the jingle of glasses and china; or at the Spiezerhof in the garden. He has a transient sense of rejoicing at the thought of how mystified and annoyed the widow will be if he has this glorious-looking guest to dinner.

It is quite on the cards that she will refuse to dine with him and come back to her own comfortable *châlet* to dinner. Of course, if she shows the slightest disinclination to dine with him, he isn't going to press it, but he's awfully pleased that she will let him go with her to the Beatushoehle. He has a slight twinge of conscience as he remembers that it is the widow who told him all about the Beatushoehle, but he thinks he never swears, so he says inwardly, "Dash it!" instead of the other word,—he never promised to take the widow. Besides, the chances are that she won't know that this girl isn't a friend.

"Isn't Switzerland funny?" she says suddenly. "There's so much that's beautiful, and yet,—oh, I don't know, it's all so made subservient to the tourist, so like a scene in an opera, isn't it, when you feel that the more they pile on the agony the happier you are; so—so melodramatic, isn't it?—yet without the natural "crash" of dramatic situation. . . I don't know, there's something unsatisfactory about it all; I suppose it's too beautiful, and you seem to want to see something dreary, a blind wall, or a dirty courtyard with grubby children playing about . . . or—or bricks, or something——"

She breaks off. It has never struck him that it is so, but all at once he sees what she means, and he leans towards her suggestion.

"I think I know what you mean." His voice is the perfectly good form voice one hears in London drawing-rooms. It goes together with the mysterious handshake which changes so often, yet which holds so much in it, according to the exact height at which it is poised, and into which only a personality can infuse any meaning.

"The fact is, I always feel at my best—happiest, I mean," he feels that he has put his foot into it now, "on a Scotch moor."

She laughs merrily.

"Oh, how English you are!"

When he gets up to go she has an impulse to ask him to stay to luncheon, then discards it. She doesn't know this man, and she—well, she is Rinaldo's wife, and . . . she has an idea that he may swoop down at any minute, though there has been no time yet for the Cardinal to get her letter.

She walks to the gate with him.

"Then I'll let you know," he says.

"Yes, about four."

She nods her half-friendly, half-callous nod, and he takes his way back to the Spiezerhof in the glare and dust. He is glad she didn't ask him to lunch.

CHAPTER VII

MISS PRYM came back to Rome from her *villegiatura* for two days during August, in answer to Julian Vandegger's earnestly expressed desire that she should allow him to see her at once. He was painting, she knew it, a picture that was to be sent as soon as possible to an art exhibition in the United States, and the kindly little woman, inured to the ways of artists, felt instinctively that he had no time to come to her, and that the matter was one of urgency. She had heard no details as yet of the gossip, because most of her friends had left Rome about the same time as she had. One friend, in that tantalising way peculiar to some of one's correspondents, had written:

"Isn't it very sad about the d'Ostias?"

Then, when tingling with curiosity, Miss Prym had written, "What about the d'Ostias? I haven't heard anything," the friend had left the letter unanswered. But she had come in answer to the appeal of "one of her boys" with that complete grasp of the importance of what he wanted to see her about, which made her so invaluable.

August in Rome, deserted by the tourist, and, for the most part, by the smart world,—how different it is to the Rome of the stranger, of the tourist! Outside, the buildings, the streets, everything gold, white and deep shadow, the incisive black shadow of the dog days, which eats into the white and gold, and everything, almost sound, imprisoned, enmeshed, caught in a fillet of heat. The Rome of the Romans, with its coruscating, bewildering blaze everywhere, which rags need to make them beautiful. Groups of young men and maidens, laughing, white-teethed, ox-eyed maidens, assembled in groups, sitting lazily on the steps of the Piazza di Spagna. Models in Roman peasant dress, knowing well that no artist will come to fetch them; goatherds too weary to watch their flocks, who browse inertly where they can; the priests, looking like the shadows sprung to life, trying to walk rapidly, energetically, hat in hand, and every now and then wiping the perspiration from their foreheads with their large cotton handkerchiefs. Wine-sellers, shop-keepers of all sorts, sitting in their doorways chatting while they chase away the flies. Little children crying drearily, their mothers too hot and weary to castigate or comfort. The city paralysed within, and the only cool corners the inside of the churches, the dark corners by altars, where bare feet steal to, not for prayer, but to feel beneath them the cold, resting sensation of mosaic and marble. And when Julian entered the darkened drawing-room of Miss Prym's apartment, it gave him the sensation of entering a house where a death has taken place. The outer shutters were closed to keep out the heat, the chairs were covered with chintzes, and the mirrors and pictures hung with yellow tarlatan. The furniture, hardly distinguishable, gave the impression at first of groups of islands and peninsulas in some unknown planet, while Miss Prym who, standing up to receive him, with a stray ray of light from between the shutters pointing like a designating finger at her white-grey locks, gave the impression of being her own reflection in a glass.

And indeed, in a metaphorical sense, there had been a death, if not in Miss Prym's apartments, then in Rome—the death of an important personage, standing out amongst the daily dying, the social death of Susan Roach.

She had passed away, and none would see her again in Rome, and he, wanting to act the part of friend, sought her grave to place flowers on it, the flowers of an unjudging, uncriticising remembrance.

Now that she was no more amongst them, he was beginning to understand her. She, like Shakespeare, like all things sincere and wonderful, like all those who have soared away or above, or beyond, the minds of others, or been faithful to the strange apposites of human character, and not posed to be this or that, must permeate in spirit, and work silently through the confusion of life. It cannot be otherwise. The casting of the bread of a human being's own personality, if that personality be a magnificent one, on the waters of life, must result in the finding of it after many days, and the courage in her must one day sweep away misunderstandings.

A proud ship she seemed to Vandegger now, a proud ship fashioned for conquest, sailing in troubled waters with no brave captain shouting from the bridge, and no strong man at the wheel.

Yet now that Miss Prym stood there, a gracious-comic figure in the short linen skirt of a young girl, shorter in front than behind, caught up a little by the increasing obesity of age, and with a coral chain wound round her neck and falling to her waist, with a ruche, in the fashion of thirty years ago, around her throat,—he hardly knew why he had sent for her. What could she do ? Nothing. . . .

For quite an hour they talked of her, of Susan and of what was being said, and it was while they talked that Julian Vandegger grew to learn that he loved her—and while she listened and put in suggestions and surmises and asked questions, the wonder rose and spread and widened within, which is a species of incomprehensible revelation to those who have not been loved (Miss Prym had had one proposal in her life from an elderly clergyman), the wonderful revelation of an unexplained fact, of how some women, even some women who seem unlovable, draw love towards them, long-ending, passionate and oft-repeated love, the love of many,—attract it as the sunflower attracts the sun.

Julian Vandegger loved her too. The prim little woman couldn't quite understand it, though Susan had thrown some of her magnetic glamour over herself, much as a luxuriant bloom envelops the growing things around it in the abundance of its richness of colour, and its pervading perfume. It was evident that Julian Vandegger loved her, so had so many others, if all the talk were true, if Susan's own confidences were true. She was beginning to think that they were. And the love of Julian Vandegger seemed to protect her from the criticism of the old maid's mind, seemed to enhance and glorify her personality, as much, if not more, than the fact did that she was Lady Susan Roach, daughter of Lord Vermoyle, the wife of the Duca d'Ostia, and had lived under the protection of a great Cardinal of Rome.

"How ridiculous all you men are about a pretty woman!"

Miss Prym seated herself bolt upright on a high, stiff-backed arm-chair, her feet barely touching the ground, and turned almost merrily towards Julian Vandegger. He was growing accustomed to the darkness now, and could distinguish her features, the strange incongruousness of the parts of her face which were sallow and wrinkled, compared with patches of fresh pink skin, fair and soft like a girl's, yet he could see now the kindness of the soft, grey eyes.

"It isn't that, Miss Prym; it doesn't matter now, whether she's beautiful or plain. . . We must find her."

"Find her, but if she's gone away with that man——"

"She hasn't." Julian Vandegger spoke emphatically. She had asked him to be a friend, and he did not believe that she had done so. . . if she had, then he was mistaken about her; yet as he said it, he felt the great doubt in him returning as to whether she might, after all, have done this. . . . It seemed so unlikely, and yet was it not always the unlikely that she did? The doubt arose again within him which always arose in the minds even of those who adored Susan d'Ostia most: the doubt as to whether she was indeed so strong, so callous, as she appeared, or a helpless thing in the clutches of passion. He remembered the passion—the shamelessness it had seemed then to him—with which she had uttered the words, "I'm madly in love with Cardinal Sapponi."

Now, as they returned to him, they did not seem shameless at all, merely the foolish utterances of a girl-child.

He fancied, thought it quite likely, that she had married Don Rinaldo without love, for some reason of her own in keeping with the strange arguments of her mind, because she was afraid of Lori, or because she had seen the hopelessness of her love for the Cardinal; but if she still loved the Cardinal, she could not go away with Lori. He thought he knew what had been passing in her mind . . . but he didn't know, Julian Vandegger, of the last interview with the Cardinal. That was the Cardinal's secret—would be for ever. It was the only moment of which he was ashamed, yet it was something he could not even put into a confession.

"We must find her," he told Miss Prym, and she began to feel agitated, half-fearful, half desiring, to be mixed up in this scandal.

"But how are we to do it?"

The common sense of her remark irritated him.

"There's only one thing to do, to trace up Lori, and then——"

He would not even finish the phrase "if she's with him."

Oh no, if he found her with him, then indeed she would be dead to Rome, dead to all of them except perhaps to him, Julian Vandegger, who would stand by her, rid her of him as he had done that day, following the Cardinal into the studio.

"But if she's with him, then of course there's nothing to be done. You couldn't expect the Duca d'Ostia to take her back."

"No, I suppose not, but I was not thinking of that. Miss Prym, I'm sure she's not with him, but if I can find her, if she's in any trouble, will—will you go to her?"

"Oh, my dear Julian!"

Miss Prym didn't refuse to do as he asked, but the tone of voice was a protest against his exacting.

"You knew her mother."

Once more the image of the dead Bianca del Val rose up to invite assistance for her storm-child.

"Oh, well, you know, that's one of the things that annoyed me very much about her." Miss Prym spoke hastily now, fussily, almost annoyed. "The way she told everybody that I was a friend of her mother's, that I was looking after her in Rome. I have the vaguest recollection of her mother, I knew her mother very slightly, and I remember that the girl came to me once, and told me that she couldn't bear her husband, that she was going away. It shocked me very much indeed, but she was a beautiful creature, and—well, I suppose

I didn't take it seriously. It was twenty years ago, you know, and I was younger, too."

Miss Prym gave a merry laugh. "I didn't speak out my mind as I should have done, and she went, I believe . . . went to America and took the child. I have wondered once or twice since, whether, if I had spoken more crossly, she wouldn't have gone."

Julian Vandegger couldn't imagine that anything that Miss Prym could have said, would have stayed Bianca Vermoyle from her purpose, any more than it would have Lady Susan, if her mind had been made up, but he did not answer. His mind was seeking this way and that, the possible whereabouts of Susan d'Ostia. It would be no use, he knew, following up the probable track. There would be no probable track. It would be the unimaginable, the unexpected, that she would have done. She might even be in a nunnery now—and Miss Prym went on,

"And I was really most annoyed, quite horrified in fact, when I heard that she had been giving out all over Rome that I always went everywhere with her. Mrs. Borynge told me. . . . I heard that the Cardinal thought I was always with her; he certainly thought that I was with her when she went to your studio."

Julian Vandegger was laughing inwardly

at the recollections awakened by what his old friend was telling him.

Yes, it was quite true that Lady Susan had done this, but it amused him vastly that Miss Prym should have heard of it. Now suddenly he ceased smiling at the recollection.

"And I really was most surprised at you for allowing it, for helping her to deceive; she should never have sat to you alone."

Miss Prym was speaking her mind now, at all events. He had an impulse to tell her that he had asked why she never came, had asked Lady Susan to bring someone, but how could he explain to her that no one could do anything with Lady Susan, that she resented his—everybody's—interference, and what she intended to do she did? He could hear her voice, it seemed to him, saying "Dear old Prym, poor old Prym!"

The only thing to do was to take her scolding good-humouredly. It didn't frighten him much. But he grew suddenly grave at the remembrance of the studio, of how it had led to her meeting Lori. He felt ashamed, too, at having taken her face as the model for his Sapho picture.

"She thought a tremendous lot of you." He was a little ashamed now of being so hypocritical, but he must smooth her ruffled feelings.

"She knew that no one would say anything if she was with you." Spoken, this didn't sound like a compliment exactly, and he rushed on to say more.

"I fancy that she thought that you were a great friend of her mother's. . . and then she really is very English at heart, in some things, and I think she had such confidence in you because you were English . . . she was dreadfully unprotected, dreadfully alone really, although she knew so many people."

There was a few moments' silence, while Miss Prym tried to battle with the broadening barrier which was trying to raise itself within, between herself and Susan d'Ostia.

She gave a sigh.

"She's dreadfully wild, I'm afraid."

"Oh, only full of fun."

"Well, this is more than fun, to run away from your husband,—just exactly like her mother." She sighed again.

"We really must get her back . . . I'm sure it could all be patched up again."

"Well, I hope so, but then so much depends——"

Yes, he knew as well as Miss Prym that all depended on where she had gone, and how, and if she had gone alone.

When they parted he had extorted a promise from her to help him if it were possible to do so; he had also insisted on her dining with him at a little restaurant standing high up above Rome, where it would be cool and fresh.

This suited the old lady admirably, for she had dismissed her cook before leaving.

She came out on to the landing with him, and after he had gone, as she set about inspecting and overhauling her various possessions, to make sure that neither rust nor moth had corrupted, nor thieves broken through to steal—an occupation which entirely compensated for the effort of leaving the seaside to come into hot Rome at this season,—she murmured to herself more than once,

"He's a dear, good boy."

Once she added another adjective.

"He's a dear, good, foolish boy."

When he met her at dinner, wearing a bodice that belonged to an evening skirt and had once been low, filled in with lace tucks and with added lace sleeves, she could not fail to detect the excitement of his whole being. He almost rushed at her—she had refused to go with him: "I shall go up there early, and sit and wait and get cool till you come," she had told him—and seized both her hands.

"The Cardinal has had a letter from her."

He held her two hands in his, in what Miss Prym had been pleased to call "that beautiful, impulsive, foreign manner, which is so different to our English notions, but which I do like," and added,

"We've found her, we've found her, and she's not with Lori!"

"Thank God!" Miss Prym added this as fervently as if she, and not Julian, had been perturbed about her. He couldn't help thinking that she was a little inconsistent.

"She is coming back," he went on, as he told her what had happened, his optimism forcing him to the conclusion that of course she could come back, that of course Rinaldo would take her back.

On his way from Miss Prym's apartment, he had met the Cardinal close to the Palazzo Sapponi, and the Cardinal had asked him to come in. It was strange how friendly these two were becoming over Susan.

"I've had some news," he told Julian. "She's in Switzerland, and she wants to come back to her husband" . . . then, after a moment's pause he had added,

"I'm going to see what can be done."

And because he didn't know the pulse of Rome, because he did not know what a difficult task it was for him, Ludovico Sapponi, to go to Rinaldo, Julian's spirits had run up quickly, full of promises of joy, as a flag is rapidly hoisted on the mast of a ship that wishes to give friendly greeting to another, and on the strength of the good news, these two, the old maid and the young man, drank a whole bottle of Asti Spumante.

He respectfully attributed it to that fact that she pushed her arm through his on the way home, for she insisted on walking back, and continually repeated.

"My dear boy, I'm very glad to hear it. I'm exceedingly glad to hear it. I'm glad I came at once."

She had never called him "her dear boy" before, not to his face, only to herself.

But Lady Susan's letter had come too late; her best impulses always would, probably.

As he walked home, after leaving Miss Prym at her *appartement* and having stood chatting with her in the hall, the newspaper boys were shouting, with explosive excitedness, the news that there had been a great scene at the Circolo, that the Duca d'Ostia had slapped the face of the Count Lori, that a duel between the two would take place the next morning.

The whole street, the whole town, seemed to be re-echoing with those two names, rung out in varied accents by the newspaper boys of Rome.

"Osti . . . a . . . Ostia! Lori . . . Lo . . . ri . . ." Long after midnight the cry rose from quarter after quarter.

"Ostia . . . Osti . . a! Lori . . . Lo . . . ri . . ." till at last all that was heard was—

"Stia . . . i . . i . . ."

The storm-child's spirit still hovered about Rome, and by the morning, Julian, the Cardinal, —everyone—knew that her name would once more be blazoned in print all over the Eternal City, all over Italy, all over the world, and ring out to the ears of more thousands than the clanging bells of Rome.

CHAPTER VIII

"So now you know all about me—the worst at all events."

Yes, it must be the worst, at least he hoped it was, for though her tone, and sometimes even her manner, conveyed that there might be other things, it was the most extraordinary story he had ever heard. It sounded like a confession almost, and he had a vague idea that perhaps Catholics were like this from sheer habit, prone to lay bare their inner selves. He had known very few, but he had wondered once or twice what on earth they could find to confess, those who didn't apparently do anything that was flagrantly wrong, and concluded by thinking that they must make up something, drawing on their imagination, magnifying trivial acts and random thoughts. He couldn't help hoping that this girl had been making up something, or at least magnifying her emotions, her feelings, her deeds. He did not know that what had been the most severe shock of all was to find that she was married.

"And now you see I've made up my mind to do just as everyone else does, to become "bourgeoise" and domestic, and to go back to my husband." Her husband! What a fool he had been to imagine that she would live alone like that, unless she were married, for there were no signs of a chaperon anywhere.

It was much later that he comforted himself for what, for a moment, had lain somewhat painfully on his conscience, namely, the thought that if he had known that she was married he would not so far have forgotten himself as to ask her to let him take her to Beatushoehle. Soberer reflection—that reflection which with the Englishman always results in his reconciling himself with his own conscience—brought about the conviction that there would have been no possible harm in his looking after her dog for her, and accompanying her on an expedition. After all, he would have done the same for the wife of any of his friends.

That he was dismayed at once at the thought that she had a husband, and at the revelation of her past which she had made to him, *that* he only realised later. All that she told him was intensely interesting, like the novels he so rarely read. He read the breezy, sporting ones, which are the favourites of men, or tales of travel and adventure; lately he had read a great many books on Japan and China: but it fringed on the mysteries against which all the Englishness of him hurled itself.

It sounded as if she were an adventuress.

Later on, he told himself that it was such a thousand pities that such a pretty, charming girl should have been married so early to a foreigner—been mixed up with all these Catholic fellows. If she had had a sane, good English bringing-up, such as his mother had given to his sisters, she'd have been the nicest woman in the world. It was hard lines, and in his heart he, too, began to feel a little resentment against her dead mother. Of course, she must have been rather an odd woman. (Poor Bianca, here was another who blamed her!) She hadn't had a fair chance, he repeated to himself.

It was like Susan to choose a mysterious place for her confession,—or perhaps it may have been that the weird fascination of the Beatushoehle had thrown its spell upon her, for who that has seen it, has not felt the charmed interest of that strange cave, of that underworld, which invites the mind to dwell on a strange, distant past, when men hid from their fellow men, or sought out a solitude unknown, undreamed of, in the present day? It had all delighted her—the short climb to the entrance, the picturesque cloister-like entrance, which the fancy of the modern architect has deemed in keeping with the scene, the room in which the waxen figure of St. Beatus sits, reading the Bible in his monk's dress, while behind him glows the fire on which the fish is cooking which he has caught in the lake below.

But it was the cave itself which aroused Susan. She had chattered merrily all the way across the lake, and along the road from Beatenbucht to the Hoehle she had told Sledmere the legend of the place, of St. Beatus himself, and been amused at Sledmere's delight in the fact that the legend says that he came from Scotland. She had even told him amusing anecdotes about the Saint, whom she had been reading up, she said; but it was the place itself that filled her with an intensity of interest and feeling she could not describe, and which was quite different to the interest aroused in Sledmere. To him it was a phenomenon of great and absorbing interest; to her it was a sensation. Was it possible that this had been worked by the hands of men, before blasting and all the devices we probably miscall modern, had been found, to help man to dominate the universe? Was this the work of men, hundreds and thousands of years before? As she stood there in the pathway, with the great, rushing stream tearing down on each side of her, over the rock-strewn floor, and lifted her face to the stony roof on which the electric light seemed to bring out the very tissue of the stone, she began to conjure up strange visions of years before, when perhaps in that stone-formed chapel, men and women and children had grouped themselves, terrified, around the secret altar, praying silently perhaps, yet not daring to raise their voices in praise to God. How strange and terrible it must have been, this cave long years ago, when there was no artificial light. She seemed to see figures moving, massed, dark figures creeping from inner cave to inner cave, moving onwards stealthily to where the first pale fingers of dawn brought message of the great daylight outside. What had passed within this rocky domain, long and broad enough to shield an army, and with crannies and nooks and hidden corners behind rocks ?

And then thought became closer and more intimate, as into her fancies she interwove herself. What had prompted St. Beatus to come here ? Was it indeed the wish to convert a strange people beyond the seas, in obedience to a command ? She laughed inwardly at the legend of the dragon he had met and vanquished. Or had he come there, a weary outcast from the world, seeking rest and meditation as she had come to seek it, realising that there are griefs and wounds which isolate us completely from our fellow men ?

And had he found peace here ? The waxen image of him, seated in the little cell, seemed to proclaim that he had.

Was it possible, then, to grow calm and peaceful, perhaps happy even, perfectly alone ?

Was it indeed his faith which sufficed him? And, the spirit of adventure of life coursing always in her veins, she wondered whether she could stand such a life, how it would be with her if she found such a place away from the world, from everyone, and prayed and fasted and meditated from morn till eve.

She shivered. Fancy dying here alone! How did St. Beatus die? Those last weeks or hours or days, when Death already held him in his grip, and he could not fish in the lake nor get food? Had they fed him, his little flock, and one after the other climbed to find the pastor to bring him what he needed; or had some faithful one, or some repentant Magdalen perhaps, watched by his dying hours, by that rock-hewn, tomb-like bed? Or had they wondered why he did not come, while the weary hours went by, and morning and night revolved with dull, slow sameness, till the last cold sweat of death mingled with the damp that oozed from out the walls? Susan d'Ostia shivered as she stood there, watching the rushing waters coming through that weird tunnel cave beneath the mountain, and the ghastliness of her thoughts brought the sense of need of human companionship—of closer intimacy with her fellow-men and women. The youth and life in her recoiled beneath the crouching darkness. The cave reminded her of pictures of the Creation; of other planets of which the volcanoes were extinct, icebound planets, where no humans could live; and yonder corner cave, where the light had been so cunningly placed behind a boulder, that nothing but a dim glow was visible, reminded her of Gustav Doré's illustration of the Inferno. She needed air and light, and her share of life. She must go back to Rinaldo, to all of them, to Rome, or she would go mad.

She had not noticed that Sledmere had gone on with the guide, for in some places there is only room for one at a time to step between the torrents, and he had fancied that she was following.

Now she did not notice that he had returned. She was too engrossed with her own thoughts, thoughts that were too painful for her, which sickened her while she could not throw them off, and yet which resembled in a way the surroundings. The depth and mysteriousness of the cave, with its arches and inner recesses, its whole cryptic presentment, its darkness, the impression of underlife and movement, of hurry and tumult and onrushing, of desire to reach somewhere, regardless, going on even under the mountain, resembled the *besoin de vivre* in her, the deep philosophic thoughts, the sullen, hidden, yet raging storm within the very soul of Bianca's child, raging against fate, against sorrow, against hidebound conventional tradition, against the weakness and un-understandingness of men, against life itself; while her form, her whole personality expressed grace and good form and the *savoir faire* of the woman of the world, even the smiling acquiescence of those who have accepted things as they are—just as the flower-strewn, vine-clad mountain above them, dotted with its *châlets*, standing between orchard trees, with aprons of rich, green sward spread out in front of them, gave no inkling of the fierce tumult of torrents below. The rich, swelling, bursting hill-springs of her heart, how they resembled the fierce tumult of the torrents beneath the Beatenberg!

"Why, I thought you were close behind us."

The human voice startled her for a second, as if she were indeed a denizen of this weird under-world, yet she did not answer him for a moment. Then slowly she turned her face towards him. The eyes were heavy with thought, the mouth drawn almost like that of an old woman. Was it the effect of the electric light that seemed to have changed her so, and was it his fancy that those strange, dark eyes of hers seemed to swim in tears?

No, he could not have been mistaken, for when she spoke it was as if her voice had broken through a sob.

"It was stupid of me, but . . . oh, it's so fascinating, so terrible, and yet so beautiful, isn't it ?" Then her voice brightening a little, "It is so ridiculous, but somehow it reminded me of my own life ; there's been such a rush always, everything at a gallop like these great torrents, confusing me, giving me no time to think or understand, and then there have been such dark, awful moments like those dreadful corners below those huge boulders, and yet there's been a glow about it all, something mysterious and beautiful, like poetry. . . Oh, I can't explain myself. . ."

He did not fully enter into the richness of her emotions, yet to a certain degree her words expressed thoughts in touch with ideas that had come to him, as he wandered through the extraordinary place, where here and there in places snows still lingered, which had fallen through crevices and apertures in the rock, the natural windows which had admitted pale rays of light in ancient days ; and the foot slipped over relentless ice that would not melt, while outside summer and sunshine leapt and kissed each other, and soft, summer breezes played hide and seek behind the waving pines, then ran across the grass calling softly to the birds and flowers, catching up fragrance and strewing it about broadcast. Yet there was a witchery in the darkness, in the mysteriousness of which this girl seemed the embodiment, this girl, whom without knowing it, he was beginning to love, albeit the very mysteriousness of her frightened him, frightened him as, man that he was, the cave frightened him; not physically, but mentally. The spirit of Puritanism of his forefathers, which has done so much good and so much harm—who shall tell the proportion of each?—and which dies so hard, was still alive within him, and in his mind, too, had arisen pictures of the creation, when the spirit moved on the face of the waters; and pictures of hell.

Had she uttered the words outside in the smiling sunshine, or with their eyes wandering over spaces to distant horizons, he would have understood them less. Here they found a vibrating response. And as if she felt the telepathy of their surroundings, she chose impulsively to tell him her story here.

"It's like being in purgatory, isn't it?" she uttered breathlessly. "It isn't exactly hell, is it, and yet there's none of the brightness of heaven."

He laughed awkwardly, but he had a mild sense of humour, the humour of the Englishman, which is so heavy at times.

"I'm afraid I'm not an authority on purgatory."

Susan laughed too, then she grew grave again. "Let's sit down."

Both were conscious as they seated themselves, that there was something strange in the appearance of two mortals, clothed in modern dress, being here in the cave that had sheltered the humans of centuries ago—if it had—— Susan had wondered once if the whole story had been cooked up to add interest to the Hoehle.

As she sat down on one slab of rock, and he on another, she felt a sense of gratitude that there were no other terrible tourists visiting the cave to-day. The guide, an intelligent man who had interested Sledmere, principally perhaps because he spoke English pretty well, seeing that they had no intention of moving on for the present, remembered something that was wrong with the burners of the electric lights, about a hundred yards lower down, and left them,—perhaps he imagined them lovers. And the two sat there and talked, or rather Susan talked and he listened, fascinated, but also inwardly recalcitrant against her witchery. All, she told him: of her mother, of her strange upbringing, of the man in America who loved her, of her love for the Cardinal, of her marriage with Rinaldo, of her interview with the Cardinal, of her flight, of her loneliness, of her horror of the loneliness, of Lori, and of her decision to go back to Rinaldo. . . .

"He's a dear, good thing, but—it will all be rather boring . . . only I suppose it's my duty. One's duty is always boring, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is."

Truth extracted this concession from him, although he was beginning to feel dreadfully upset by her recital. The grim half-darkness of the scene added such strange force to it, then he added hastily, unaware of the lameness of his speech,

"You'll feel so much happier, so much more peaceful, don't you know."

He offered up this tribute of belief in the orthodox, to his doctrines, in the spirit of a martyr; he didn't know how blank everything looked within to him just now.

"I don't know about that." She laughed mischievously again. "I'm afraid that I've never found that virtue brought any reward but its own, and apparently it can't afford a very handsome one . . . you know the saying—'If you're virtuous you'll be happy, but you won't have a good time.'"

The recklessness of her words jarred upon some inner sensitiveness of his, but he could not help laughing.

"Oh well, you know, it isn't everything to have a good time; in the end, don't you know——"

She didn't know how he was battling within with something virile and insisting, which was at war with his creeds, with his upbringing, with all his moral code, with his standards of right and wrong, even with his chivalry, though in a way his chivalry was bound up in it, for the thought flashed, "This girl wife is miserable, alone, deserted. . . What is a man's duty in a case like this ?" In an instant he seemed to be in touch with the pure and the sane in her, with the girlishness, with the Englishness in her. Vermoyle's daughter, (he had met Vermoyle, knew him to be respected throughout the British Isles) . . . she came of good stock, and he was in touch, he thought, with the virtue of good stock, and repudiated the foreign and Catholic influences in which she had become enmeshed.

Why couldn't he be her friend ? He would. She needed a friend ; a good, true, honest, clean-minded, British man-friend.

But she annihilated the possibility of friendship by her next words. She turned almost fiercely upon him, spoke as she had spoken to the Cardinal. Out in the sunshine she might have appealed to his tenderness, here beneath the mountain, sincerity, nature, the dark, deep corners of nature, the rushing torrent that swept along like passion, devastating, regardless, inscrutable, untameable, indomitable, had their innings.

"You don't believe that," her words rang out almost sharply, "you're not speaking the truth, you don't think that all one's life one must crush every impulse, deny oneself happiness, love, life,"—there was an almost liquid caress in the way she uttered those two last words which awoke passion in him,—"for an end, of which after all we know nothing . . . for an idea. . . ."

"All this that we feel," she touched her breast with her two gloved hands, "must be for something . . . oh, I know what you'll say," there was a derisive smile on her lips, as her voice fell from excited heights to a soft measuredness, which was like the tinkling of a stream running over grass.

"You'll tell me that all that one feels must be controlled, pressed into the service of God . . . dried up, 'cornered' as we say in America, so that we can offer it up in packets, in tabloids on the altar. . . But we don't feel like that about God ; we pretend to, and, yes, I suppose some of those who have gone into monasteries and nunneries have felt like that, but it's all in the imagination. They fancy all that, because they haven't had the real thing, don't you know, but the real thing must exist somewhere. It must !"

Her outburst terrified him more than the scoffing, groaning tumult of the torrents that coursed, one at their feet, one just beyond them, on the other side of the little wooden bridge. His eyes fell on a pool of churning waters in which a huge stone was being slowly ground into shape, rounded into a ball by the incessant movement of the waters, resembling a soul given over, hopeless, powerless, to the ceaseless mercilessness of fate, of eternity.

"I don't agree with you, not entirely at least, but you women are so much more clever than we poor men . . . Upon my word I can't answer you. You sweep a fellow off his feet. I——"

Slowly they rose to their feet and instinctively they wandered back to find the guide, to find the entrance, stumbling now and then on the unevennesses of the rocks. Images, both of them, of God's creation, this man and this woman in semi-illumined darkness, close together, side by side in body, yet with chasms of mystery, of incomprehensibleness between them, both seeking a guide, both fleeing the mystery of underground and undercurrent of thoughts, which, though it fascinated, yet terrified them: both alike feeling for the opening of life, for the truth of beginnings, for the entrance to reality, both suffocated by the dark grottoes and caves of wonder, both seeking too, for that third who explains life, who in the Old Testament is the Serpent, who in real life is the little child who trusts, who is not afraid, who wanders into spaces, into the open field; who fears nothing, yet who is recalled always by the grown-up, who does not understand that freedom which belongs to the child, who does not understand the limitlessness of God's gift—yet with instinctive groping for space, for the outer air.

If they walked hand in hand they might

have found the entrance to the Beatushoehle together, but good form, civilisation, demanded that they should walk alone. Sometimes the man is first, sometimes the woman ; the horror of their surroundings sometimes fascinating, sometimes terrifying—yet both seeking the Light.

CHAPTER IX

THE days went and came, but brought no answer from the Cardinal, and Susan's heart died within her. The barrier between her and the outer world rose a mountain high, covered with clouds, so that she saw only the dark base of it, and the peaks above unattainable. What did this silence mean? That they all repudiated her, even her *Magnificenza*, that when he had cast her out and said in that angered voice, " Go! Go!"—Rinaldo—Rome—everyone had joined to repudiate her? or that he had not seen him, would not; or had done so and failed? The awful silence terrified her and magnified at once the enormity of her shortcomings and the magnitude of the power of fate. It seemed to make of the verdict of society something out of all proportion even with the wrath of God.

" I don't wonder," she said to herself once, wickedly, with a return of the old desperate Susan Roach, " that people become religious. God is so much less exclusive than society. Do you think," she asked Sledmere once with a dry throat, " that they won't have me back? Wouldn't it be awful!"

Yes, now for the first time it seemed to her that all that mattered was to be well with the world, the world she had always scoffed at, but which was stronger than she was.

And he, looking at her young, sweet face, told himself that it was impossible that she should have done anything beyond recall, impossible even that she should have done or thought those things which she had told him.

Once they had got out of the Beatushoehle it had all seemed part of the weirdness of the cave—the ravings of an hysterical child who imagined that its parents hated it, and that God was angry with it. . . . It is true that the sun had gone down, that it was almost dark before they came out of the cave, but the sweet summer evening was normal and healthy and good. He had intended to ask her to dine with him at the restaurant, but somehow her confession (for it was nothing less than a confession) had made it impossible for him to do so, so he thought—and she, too, seemed anxious to return.

"We can just catch the seven boat," she said a little flurriedly, for she was sorry now that she had told him. She was always putting her foot into it, seeking on this side and the other the confidant on whom she could lay the burden of her own thoughts. Instead, once more she had knocked against the heart of the un-understanding, weak man ; awakened passion instead of sympathy, as she always did. So the inn-servant knocks at the door of the weary, travel-stained wanderer who wishes to sleep late, and rouses him, and leaves the other one to sleep and miss his train.

Somewhere in the world there slept surely the man who wished to catch the early train. She uttered her thoughts to him.

" Isn't it funny, the way one misses things in life ? I believe that if I had had the patience to wait, I would have found my twin soul. He would have to be strong, don't you know, a brute really, a sort of bear, who yet at times could be nice."

Why did this girl awake the brute in him ? He was beginning to wish that he had never met her, since in spite of her adorableness, she was dead sea fruit to him.

He gathered from her conversation that she did not love Rinaldo, that her imagined love for the Cardinal was dimmed, if not dead.

" One couldn't go on caring, could one, for a man who is only half human ? " she had said to him ; yet, because he was Sledmere, he could not bring himself to utterly love her, who belonged to another.

On the *Dampfer* the conversation had been stilted, and she had realised that she herself had raised a barrier between them.

" He's dreadfully shocked, poor dear," she said to herself.

"Shocked and adoring"—what an awful combination. She only hoped that in American parlance he would "pan out all right." She had no time to think of him much; when she did, it was with the usual fleeting regret that she had made a confidant of him. They were all alike, frightened when you told them the truth. It had not occurred to her that he was dismayed at the thought that she was married to Rinaldo—Rinaldo counted so little in her life, in the scheme of things as she saw it, that she could not gauge the way Sledmere looked upon the fact that she was a married woman. All the rest, what she had told him about the Cardinal, even about Lori, he looked upon as childish hysteria, the exaggerated recital of the love affairs of a girl, but the husband,—that stuck, and made of her the forbidden fruit which yet was so tantalisingly inviting. Aubrey, Earl of Sledmere, felt as if he were beset by the roaring lion, and that Satan clutched at his soul. He was seriously considering whether he oughtn't to leave at once, without seeing her again. What kept him still at the Spiezerhof was the girlish sweetness of her face, which belied all mystery.

"Such a dear, pretty girl, so young, and married to a foreigner, a Catholic." He had never been in such a dilemma before. To stay seemed to be playing with fire, to go seemed unchivalrous, unmanly. He resolved to stay till she received an answer from the Cardinal. He told himself that no one on earth would be happier than he would be, if he could put her in the train for Rome, see her off on the way to her husband. And, poor dear, he thought he was telling the truth to himself. After the visit to Beatushoehle he did not go to see her again. He longed to, but it was the way he reconciled himself to his conscience. He would stay here to see if he could be of use, but he wouldn't go and see her, it wouldn't be right. Yet, as the days went by, he longed to, because a thousand answers to his arguments presented themselves. It was the woman herself, the girl wife who had run away, as she put it, that fascinated him; he loathed her surroundings. Often he caught himself wondering how she would look in a grand old country house in England, away from it all. What on earth was Vermoyle thinking about not to come and look after her, and Strand—

"'Pon my word, some people don't deserve to have sisters and daughters."

His absence hurt her, because just now especially she needed someone to advise and help her, to be kind, and he was so different to all the others she had ever known, taking life so simply, and she had a thirst for simplicity just now—her life had grown so dreadfully complicated, the skeins had been so easily tangled, but the unravelling of them was a work she had not the courage to begin on even.

If the Cardinal failed her . . . she would wake up at night with this thought. If he failed her . . . then indeed all was at an end, for she had no one else who could approach Rinaldo. Rinaldo was her husband, a man who loved her, but many men loved her. He was nothing else to her who had married him in a dream, the dream of disillusion which is the most bewildering dream of all, for one cannot understand the beginning nor the end of it, one of those hideous dreams, in which one seeks something one has lost, which it is most important that one should find, yet without knowing what it is one seeks. Disillusion is like a nightmare on an impenetrably dark night, following one into one's waking.

And because he did not come, the silence from that other side seemed worse than ever. He, here in the canton of Bern, seemed to be echoing the cry of "Hide, hide," which Roman, scornful, disdaining lips had uttered at the name of the social leper. Those were dreadful days for Susan d'Ostia, because the importance of her act, the issues that might belong to it, became real to her for the first time. She was learning the world's lesson too late, and she had grown too old to grasp it easily. It was a weary toil now.

She had left her husband, left Rome, and who could tell what the voices were shrieking out? Was he, then, her enemy now—her *Magnificenza?*

"Teddie, my angel, there's the lake. If it's all going to be as bad as it can be, we will take a plunge, you and I. . . ."

Teddie agreed with his tail and his wet, black nose, as he agreed always with his beloved mistress. In all the world was there anyone who understood her as Teddie did?

In her darkest moments she said,

"I suppose that Teddie will die soon, and then——" It was awful to think how old Teddie was growing.

When at last the letter arrived, the sight of the Papal arms made her feel faint and dizzy. He had answered, and the sight of his handwriting brought back a thousand memories with a rush. He had answered; whatever he said, however much he upbraided her, nothing could be as bad as his silence had been. But he did not upbraid her. . . .

"My dear child," he wrote.

And her heart leaped at the old, familiar appellation. The beginning augured well, she thought, but the next lines showed her that they were, instead, of evil augury. He wrote thus because of the pity he felt for one who, erring, grew penitent too late.

"Immediately on receipt of your letter I obtained an interview with your husband. I am sorry to say that for the moment he feels very bitterly towards you, and I found it difficult to persuade him what I feel sure is the truth," ("dear *Magnificenza*," Susan murmured as she read these words) "namely, that your departure meant nothing but one of those capricious moods which I have so often deplored, and entreated you not to give way to."

The way he ignored her real reason for going took her breath away.

"Unfortunately your disappearance has given rise to a lot of gossip; this I know you will say you do not mind, but one has to mind it, as the world is. This, coupled with certain wild and exaggerated statements made to him by yourself—statements *à la* Guy de Maupassant—have embittered him. He is for the moment hurt and wounded, very naturally, and I cannot advise your returning until time has softened the very natural feelings of annoyance he feels towards you. You must, of course, judge for yourself as to the advisability of returning to the Palazzo d'Ostia, but my advice is not to do so till a reconciliation has been effected. You may rely on me to leave no stone unturned to effect that reconciliation. Should I succeed I shall endeavour to persuade him to go and see you away from Rome. I shall keep you advised as to the situation, for notwithstanding my disapproval of your act in leaving your husband, I shall, as you know, always feel interested in your welfare."

This letter was merely signed "Sapponi."

Susan sat a long, long time in the garden considering the letter, reading it over and over again, and thinking each time to detect in it some subtle, hidden thought which might or might not be contained in it.

What at first interested her most, was the fact that he had merely signed himself Sapponi. What did this imply? That he was angry, or that he could not sign himself to her as he signed the business letters of the Vatican, and would not sign himself in any more intimate way. She preferred to rest on the latter supposition.

It was dreadful, of course, to think that Rinaldo was so hurt, that she had been so talked about, but with her *Magnificenza* on her side she was hopeful of everything.

It was later that the thought came to her that Cardinal Sapponi was the last mediator of all to soften things between herself and her husband, because she had once recklessly told him that she loved him.

There was no divorce in the Church of Rome, that at least was a comfort; but a judicial separation, or one sanctioned by the Pope would be almost as bad. She could never hope to appear in Roman society again.

There were only two courses. One depended on whether Rinaldo loved her enough to forgive her and to put up with the scandal, which she told herself humorously would be far worse when she returned than when she had left; the other whether her *Magnificenza* would have the power to force him into a reconciliation. And with it all, dominating it, underlying it, was the proud realisation that if she could only see Rinaldo face to face, she could soon persuade him. The question was, would he refuse to see her? How strange it was that but a few months before, her one desire had been to leave Rome, and that now her one desire was to go there.

She did not know the thrill of joy, the delight it was to her to feel that her *Magnificenza* still took an interest in her. That the Cardinal had written in the strain he did, less from pity for her, than because he was rejoiced at the discovery that she had not gone away under circumstances which would lead ultimately to a public scandal, into which his own name might possibly be dragged,—that, she was still too young and too little experienced to understand. Still less did she grasp the subtle undercurrent of thought, the shrewd thought of the diplomat rather than of the politician, which had prompted him to return to the former attitude he had taken towards her in old days: the attitude of the fatherly priest towards the wayward child: that by this means, too, he satisfied his own conscience, the conscience which had been not a little disturbed since he had cast out Bianca's child, out into the falling twilight, out into the streets. It had been April when he cast her forth, now it was late August. It was merciful, he told himself, that the summer months had spread over the absence of Susan. If it had been in the winter, what a buzz and hubbub there would have been. *Dio mio*, the words pierced with irresistible humour to his mind,

"Take care that your flight be not in the winter."

The winters in Rome were full of gossip, thick with it as mosquitoes on a pond.

The interview with Rinaldo had been distasteful to him, yet he had seen the expediency of it, even the advantage of it. Rinaldo had not sought him out on the subject of his wife's disappearance, and the Cardinal, familiar with the pride of the Roman noble, knew that he never would; yet there were things between them, absurd things, of course, which Susan had placed between them,—as a mischievous boy lays fireworks on the lines of a tramway—which would be better explained away.

He, the Cardinal, did not for a moment imagine that Rinaldo paid any attention to what Susan had said, not in connection with himself, but he, in all probability, connected him with her disappearance.

Of that interview between her and himself he would never tell anyone, least of all Rinaldo; but this letter of hers, showing that she wished to return, that she was alone, "talking no nonsense in it"—the Cardinal put it that way—would do a great deal towards smoothing the position between himself and Rinaldo, even if he made no headway with regard to Susan herself.

The Church of Rome must protect itself and its servitors before all things.

Rinaldo had been dignified, as the Roman aristocracy always is, dignified and unbending, all the impulsive excitedness of the Italian people controlled, frozen into decorum. The interview had not been an agreeable one. There had been the sense of uneasiness on both sides. Rinaldo did not for a moment attribute any blame to the Cardinal in relation to Susan's wild statements of her devotion to him, but he blamed him for having so far outstripped the conventionalities of Rome as to keep Susan with him so long, and without quite knowing why, he blamed him for having married them. He had the disagreeable sensation of having been fooled.

It wounded him now that she should have written to his Eminence instead of to himself. That she had done so seemed to set the seal on at least some of her statements.

"She writes to your Eminence——"

He took the letter from the Cardinal and read it hastily, with assumed callousness, but the Cardinal, watching him as he read, could see the emotion expressed by the way he bit at his moustache with his under-lip, and the way he turned over the outer page of the short epistle.

"She is afraid. . ."

His Eminence put this in rather lamely.

"She has behaved atrociously. If she did not care for me——" on the young man's lips were the words, "if she cared for you," but he did not utter them; one couldn't speak like that to a Cardinal of Rome. . .

"If she did not care for me, she should not have married me; having married me she should have upheld the honour of my name."

"Duca. . ."

The Cardinal began hastily. He intended to say that there was no question of dishonour, yet to do so would be to suggest that he had to excuse himself for some of her statements.

"Oh, I know what you would suggest—that she went alone. Yes, that I believe. . ."

The words meant so clearly that he did not accuse him, Sapponi, yet they also so seemed to include him in the whole story, that the sense of discomfort returned.

"But who else is going to believe that? How am I to explain her disappearance?"

The Cardinal was silent. He could see all the difficulties, and Don Rinaldo went on talking, got up from his seat and paced the room, and the letter lay there on the table in Lady Susan's large, bold, yet legibly childish writing.

"I have heard things too serious, a host of things which it is not pleasant for a husband to hear. . ."

The Cardinal gave a short laugh.

"My dear Duca, if one paid any attention to the things one hears in Rome——"

"Oh yes, I know, but——"

Don Rinaldo looked moodily out of the window for an instant, and the sight of the ambient sunshine heating the gleaming opposite buildings as if with furnace fire, reminded them that this was the first year they had both spent August in Rome.

It was Lady Susan's fault. She seemed to have brought worry and discomfort on them all. He remembered now—Rinaldo—what his dreams had been of this August spent together —he and she together. A wave of bitterness rose within.

"And that letter"—he waved his hand scornfully towards the table. "You should not have shown me the letter if you wanted me to forgive." He, too, broke into a bitter laugh.

"She wants to come back because it is her duty."

"Ha—a——"

The fullness of the young man's misery became apparent, transparent, at that instant, but also he laid bare his love.

"Yet if I had not, you would have imagined——"

The Cardinal broke off again—to say this was to suggest . . . but Rinaldo broke in,

"I imagine nothing, I know enough. She is undisciplined, reckless——"

"Yes, she is all that"—the Cardinal made his last desperate effort—"but she is very delightful, very charming and so young—so young, Duca, so irresponsible; but your wife."

The Cardinal got up to go. There was nothing more to say.

"She seems to have forgotten it."

Still the bitterness lingered there, intensified as the minutes passed.

"You must make her remember."

"Ah, just now I cannot think, I cannot feel . . . . presently, perhaps."

There was something piteous in the young man's face, something almost agonised in the words with which he appealed to the Cardinal for time to forget his wounds—they would never heal; for time to grow to forgive—he would never forget.

"Well, if you wish it, I will come again." The Cardinal got up to go.

"It is I, Eminenza, who will do myself the honour to call on you, if I have your permission, later . . . when—when I have more courage."

He smiled pathetically at the Cardinal, who held out his hand.

The Duca d'Ostia stooped and kissed his ring.

"I thank your Eminence," he said. And Cardinal Sapponi went away with a sense of having a little restored the balance of things, of having re-established a normal situation between himself and Rinaldo, while his irritation against Susan Roach returned with renewed force.

But Susan herself, reading and re-reading the letter, knew nothing of this scene. If she had seen it by some gift of second sight or revealing vision, she would have known that all she had to do was to go to Rome, to throw her arms around Rinaldo's neck and whisper,

"I've come back, I've come back."

At a distance he could resist her, but he could not have resisted her bodily presence.

The Cardinal should have suggested this . . . or was it possible that he did not want her back in Rome?

Perhaps he was only becoming dried up.

Teddie came and laid the lame paw, which was no longer bandaged, and didn't hurt any more, in her lap.

Susan stooped and lifted one long ear and whispered to him, "He won't have us back at any price, Teddie, dear."

She did not know that her very words proclaimed that Don Rinaldo, Duca d'Ostia, her husband, who had made no impression on her horizon when she was with him, had sprung into a personality, become a personage—a dreaded personage now that he wouldn't have her back.

The stress and splendour of the roaring gale, hurricaned between them and his repudiation, raised her fighting spirit. She must get at him, force him to take her back.

Two things happened after this. The porter from the Spiezerhof arrived on a bicycle with a note from Sledmere.

"DEAR LADY SUSAN"—he began his note thus because he could not bring himself to write "Dear Duchess." In his mind, a foreign Duchess couldn't hold her own with the title of an English earl's daughter.

"I am waiting here till I hear from you whether I can be of any use. If I can, command me. If you decide to go to Rome at once, I shall return to England. My respects to the interesting invalid.—SLEDMERE."

"I will send an answer," she told the messenger on the bicycle after he had been refreshed in the kitchen.

At this moment she felt that she needed him. She wanted to show him the Cardinal's letter, to consult him; but since he wouldn't come, the American in her recoiled before the idea of asking him to do so.

Just as the messenger from the Spiezerhof had started on his return, the telegraph boy arrived. Susan Roach, followed with solemnity by Teddie, was walking back to the house, when the Italian servant brought her two telegrams. The fierce sun beat down on her gold-brown head, as she stood there and tore them open.

"Your husband seriously ill. Come at once.
"VANDEGGER."

"Your husband fatally wounded in a duel with Lori at dawn this morning. Will telegraph when I have seen him.—SAPPONI."

While she read them another telegraph messenger wheeled into the gate.

"Everything over. Do not come; coming to you at once.—PRYM."

Slowly, dazed, her step grown like that of an old woman, Susan walked up the sun-baked steps into the *châlet*. Teddie followed solemnly behind.

Life seemed arrested: the world horrible.

CHAPTER X

"I HATE to bother you, but I have had some awful news. Would you mind coming to see me?

"Yours sincerely,
"SUSAN D'OSTIA."

It seemed to Sledmere that he had expected this, been waiting for it.

"My husband is dead." She said this as she held out her hand to bid him welcome, and the thought within him was: how was it possible to believe that this girl, this child, had been a wife and was now a widow? No one would believe it; it seemed ridiculous, although she stood there in a black dress—but not in widow's garb. Joséphine had gone to Thun to order something of still deeper black, only the fitness of things had suggested that she should wear the only black dress in her wardrobe. It made her seem still fairer, still younger. It clung about her like night clouds, and round her neck she had twined a long rosary of black amber.

It was three days now since she had received those tragic telegrams. Three days, and many had reached her since. From her father, one of those she called "so British," in which he expressed his condolences in the perfunctory manner in which he would have expressed them to the president of some public institution had it been burned to the ground, and in which he asked her to command him if he could be of any assistance. He did not this time ask her to come to England, and for the first time in her life it caused her pain. She had nowhere to go, no one to fly to. There was one from Strand,—both these were re-forwarded from the Palazzo Sapponi, sent on the chance, no doubt, since all these months no one had known where she was. Strand's was a nice one:

"Just heard. Do you want me to come?"

"He's a dear," she thought, as she read it. Yes, perhaps presently she would want him to come. Poor old Prym, hers was the kindest of all. Even in the midst of horror and desolation the humorous thought ran through Susan's mind: "This is the first time I've really needed her." It was the only one that showed that someone understood what she must be passing through, and yet how strange those two words "Don't come." She was not to go, then, to her husband's death-bed, who had deserted him in life. It gave her the uncomfortable sensation of having been repudiated by him, by his relations, by Rome, for she felt instinctively that that was what the telegram meant,—that public sentiment would be against her, that it was no good now. And she had wanted so much lately to go back.

All the first day she sat like one dazed in the darkened sitting-room of the *châlet*, given over to a mute despair, speechless, with Teddie at her feet, and Joséphine coming to her again and again, horrified, but mostly miserable for her mistress, for the young mistress who had once been so merry and with whom everything seemed to go wrong.

Slowly thoughts were drifting towards her, as if she were the centre cloud of a gathering storm. The past, how it arraigned itself, and for the first time thoughts of others. The future, she could not bear to think of it—not yet. It seemed to unfold itself like leaves of black papyrus on which she could not decipher the terrible pronouncements, but whose aspect alone spoke of mourning and terror, and a long life of remorse—a long life which would be stamped with the deeds of the past.

Faces seemed to rise before her, denouncing faces. The Contessa Figi—how she would rejoice at heart, while she wailed with Rinaldo's mother.

Rinaldo's mother! The thought of her turned her sick. Rinaldo's mother, who adored her son, bereft of him, and cursing her. Yes, she was sure that she cursed her.

For the first time she looked upon the spectacle of her own misdeeds and shuddered. Rinaldo's mother would lay all the blame on to her, of course, and she was to be blamed. How extraordinary, how terrible that a woman's wild oats should raise so ghastly a harvest! Her whole being beat against the bars of injustice, the injustice of the inequality of a woman's fate and a man's. She had scoffed often at the women who bemoaned the misfortune of being women, had declared that the triumphs of women were incomparable, that the intoxication and thrill of a woman's conquest over man were more than all men's conquests in politics and war, and now she saw the difference. It did not lie in the difference of garb, nor in the physical weakness, nor in inferiority of intellect; it lay with the passions of men. . . A woman's wild oats sowed flames of fire, and reaped hell.

The burning injustice of it all smouldered while she pondered. Yet she could see now the difference, not of the act, but of its result. She had done nothing to compare with what young men did, with what married men did; she had flirted and tested and—she still clung to this—loved. Men did more than this, and the world said nothing; they broke hearts, raised flames of love here and there and left them to extinguish themselves . . . a man—she clenched her small fist when she thought of this—a man could have gone away, left his wife for a few months and yet have expected a smiling welcome when he returned; gone away anywhere, to the North Pole, and his wife would be blamed if she complained. The fiery male has to be left untrammelled to fulfil his destiny, . . . and she had only thought to amuse herself, to laugh at life's absurdities . . . and behold, the dead body of Rinaldo lay as it were at her feet, and his mother's heart was wrung for the loss of him. To herself now, too, she seemed horrible, awful, a dangerous woman, and yet she felt instinctively that she was not bad, only a storm-child striking trees to the ground in her boisterous play.

The storm-child! As she sat there and listened to the dull, moaning growl of the past, and cowered inwardly before the blasts of the future, it seemed indeed as if she were the storm-child. "The stress and splendour of the roaring gale"—there was no splendour about it; it was awful, awful!

He had fought with Lori. Therefore she was certain that it was about herself that they had fought. Rinaldo didn't know Lori, despised him . . . what else could it be?

Oh why, why had she left Rome?

Rinaldo dead, what a personage he had become, her young dead husband. She yearned over him as if she had loved him. And they would not let her go to him . . . would not let her kiss his cold, pale face, nor strew flowers over his grave.

In a sense it was just, but—her *Magnificenza* could have spared her all this. If he did not love her, he might have been kind—have counselled her.

He had spoken of a nunnery. There seemed nothing else now for her to do but to enter a nunnery, yet the mischievous thought pierced,

"Good Lord, what a life I'd lead them!"

She wasn't even sure that the bishops and cardinals of Rome would let her enter a nunnery.

All night she paced her room—leaning sometimes on the window-sill, looking out at the pale, silver line of moonlight on the lake, at the contrasting, red, twinkling lights of Spiez, at the sapphire-powdered hillsides. How infamous, how infamous was this calm and beauty of nature in the presence of the sorrow of the humans—how deriding! The perfume of the flowers, rising like distilled sweetness from below her window, reminded her of the scent of flowers strewn on a death-bed, of the Easter flowers of Rome, of the Easter lilies the Cardinal had sent her. Once the cry escaped her:

"Rinaldo, Rinaldo!" She understood him now that he was dead, loved him. . . . If he could come back now, how she would cherish him. Oh, if he could come back—come back. . .

Oh God! what was this inexorable, irrevocable death which makes of love an agony? Now and then the horror of her past came over her. It had all seemed so trivial, so childish; she had meant no ill to anyone, only to probe life and to learn to know men. Were then the women of the twentieth century to be mildly quiescent, like those of the past? Mild, inanimate creatures, who simpered and had the "vapours," with no will of their own? It seemed like it. Woman, however she might hurl herself against conditions, whatever she might win by subtlety or conquer by the fluke of charm, was to-day where she was sixty, seventy years ago. What she has gained is little as compared with what she has lost in the chivalry and protection of man.

Nearly all night she paced the floor, and her cry, uttered to the night, "Rinaldo, Rinaldo!" awoke Joséphine, who slept next door, and she came into her mistress's room.

"Joséphine, comme c'est terrible!"

She took the maid's hand and gripped it hard. Always when she had been in the midst of a crisis, servants had been her only companions.

"Il ne faut pas y penser."

That was the maid's consolation. "Ne pas y penser"—not to think of it—not to think that he lay there in Rome dead,—with her wonderful realistic imagination she could picture him dead . . . looking more like a Velasquez portrait than ever, for the live men of Velasquez have the complexion of the dead.

Dead, killed by her—oh, it was too horrible! Killed by Lori—and once Lori had fascinated her.

That night shortened Susan's life by many years. In the morning she had grown older, become the young married woman when she had looked hitherto like a girl, become a widow when she barely looked a bride.

But the next day she could not bear the darkened rooms any longer, and sat in the garden, wondering—praying, though she did not know it. The day passed without her noting the hours. She lived in the past, and asked herself again and again why such bitterness of woe had come to her. Had her mother, Donna Bianca, ever suffered like this? Yes, she must have done so when he, Ludovico Sapponi, went into the Church. She had ruined his life, his sentient human life, as she, Susan, had killed Rinaldo by aping love for another.

What curse lay upon them?

And the third day letters arrived, letters explaining what she had guessed at all the time. It was Vandegger who told her the most. Lori had given about that he knew the whereabouts of the Duchessa d'Ostia, that she had gone away with him, and what he had said had reached Rinaldo's ears, and he had slapped Lori's face on the Corso, and Lori and he had fought at dawn in the Campagna, and Lori had wounded him fatally. The reason, Vandegger wrote, that Miss Prym had told her not to come was because she would have been too late.

This, she knew, was only said from kindness. She would not have been too late for the funeral if she had started at once. But she knew that why they had kept her away was because of his relations, because public sentiment was against her, because the populace execrated her.

In her imagination she went through the scene, and instinctively held her two hands to her ears. Those criticising voices of Rome, —she seemed to hear them.

And Vandegger wrote more.

He had seen one of the seconds, who told him that Rinaldo had uttered two words only, "Susanna—amore."

"It was rumoured that the Cardinal had rushed to the Duca's bedside and been with him till the end."

Susan bowed her head as she read the letter; bowed it in deep humility and desolation and remorse.

"Susanna—amore."

All through her life these two words would ring out. He had loved her, Rinaldo, loved her and died for her.

The Cardinal's letter was cruel, she thought.

"MY DEAR CHILD,

"You will have received my telegram, and by this time have heard the sad news. I was with your husband till the end. He only regained consciousness once, and then his only words were: 'Tell her—I loved her . . . .' I need not add to your bitterness by reminding you of the cause of his death. I can only pray for you and hope that this sorrow may turn out in the end to be a blessing to your soul. It will be scant comfort to you to know that I sympathise with you from the bottom of my heart. May the peace of Christ abide with you.—SAPPONI."

The peace of Christ! The mockery of the words made Susan angry. Where could there be any peace for her? Presently, when she had the courage to do so, she would do as she had told Teddie. There was the lake.

Miss Prym's letter was the only one that brought comfort. It was wonderful how the dear British old maid entered into it all.

"MY DEAR," she wrote, leaving out all titles, all appellations, "of course I'm starting at once to be with you, but I shall not reach you till Friday, because I thought it better to stay till after the funeral. There are so many stories afloat. And—well, even a poor little person like me can tell the truth—we thought it better, Julian and I talked it over, that you should not come. It would have done no good, and of course, naturally, for the present, his mother and all the relations are inclined to blame. . . . I have always said that what is to be has to be, and of course you could not know what that dreadful man was going to do. If you had, I know you would not have gone away. . . You are so young, my dear, to go through all this, but please God, you will live to have many happy years yet. Julian insists on coming with me, but if you don't wish to see him when he comes you needn't, of course. I hope I shan't be in the way, but I knew your mother, and I can't bear to think of you in all this trouble alone.

"Your affectionate

"AGNES PRYM."

It was Miss Prym's letter which brought the first tears to Susan's eyes. Poor old Prym understood, and she had known her mother. How strange that she, out of them all, was the only one who understood. How strange were the haunts of sympathy. She had a father and a brother, and the Cardinal had loved her mother. . . . Oh, how the Church of Rome, how all churches dried up the milk of human kindness! Out of them all there were only two who came to her, who understood. Julian Vandegger the painter, and old

Miss Prym—and she was Lord Vermoyle's daughter and the Duchessa d'Ostia.

There was one other whom she thought might come, but she had grown diffident of her knowledge of men, afraid of them. She had shocked him, as she did everybody. The saving clause was, that she had told him that she wanted to go back, that she had said:

"So now I'm going back to my husband. . . ."

It was perhaps not so surprising a fact, that although Sledmere had read the account of the duel, only a short one, in the few English papers at the Spiezerhof, he had not realised that it was her husband who was dead. He had never yet, in this short acquaintance, mastered the foreign names that fell so glibly from Susan's lips. Ever since he had known her, he had called her to himself Lady Susan, and for the rest he had not paid much attention to the account of the duel, of which there were as yet few details—at least, in the papers which he had come across.

Now, as with quivering lips she told him hoarsely: "My husband is dead," the affair flashed back to his mind. The names—suddenly he reconciled them, with all she had told him, with this girl. . . Lori, Rinaldo, Duca d'Ostia. . . . She, this girl, almost a child, was the widowed Duchessa. How strange it seemed. The idea that he was mingled ever so slightly in such a terrible thing dismayed and charmed him at the same time. There was all the interest of the unusual and the romantic, coupled with the Englishman's horror of a scandal, of anything which savours of melodrama. Without being aware of it, he realised that it was in keeping with his first visit abroad, in keeping with the scenery. As she laid her hand in his, the dominating emotion was one of intense chivalrous pity for the poor young thing.

Later, when he had left her, he was annoyed with himself for feeling almost glad that she was free of all these foreign surroundings. It was lucky, perhaps, for Susan, that like most Englishmen, he considered duelling ridiculous and childish. . . . In England, no matter how much a man's wife had flirted, such a thing could not have happened. He hoped to goodness that now she would go and live with her father, or at all events, near him somewhere in healthy old England. As soon as her friends had arrived, he would go.

What rankled most of all in his mind, was the thought that they had told her not to come to the funeral. . . . It showed so clearly that she was in the wrong.

It did not make things better for Susan, so far as his opinion of her was concerned, that he should find a letter from his sister, to whom he had written a few days before, saying what a charming young girl he had met, that she should write :

"MY DEAR AUBREY,

"I do hope that you're not falling in love with someone you know nothing about. After all, if you don't want to marry Lady Rose, that's no reason why you should go and pick up some strange nobody abroad. When are you coming back?"

His eldest sister had always interfered, and he never followed her advice, but the words "some strange nobody abroad" hummed in his ears all day.

It made it a great deal worse for Lady Susan, when, the next morning, he received a letter from a friend of his, who was first secretary at the English Embassy at Rome, and to whom he had written the night of their expedition to the Beatushoehle, after he had learned who she was.

"By the bye," Sledmere had written, after other things which did not concern her, but concerned more especially the shooting of some coverts in November, with an account of the grouse doings of a mutual friend, and his, Sledmere's, regrets that he wasn't in Scotland this year,—"I've come across a charming girl from your part of the world—at least, she's Vermoyle's daughter, I understand, Lady Susan Roach, married to some distinguished Roman duke or count or something . . . perfectly charming, and so pretty . . . ."

"I strongly advise you not to have much to do with the lady you mentioned—this in confidence, of course. One hates to say it, but she is supposed to be very fast. She came to one or two of the Chief's parties. She's decidedly good-looking, but there was a lot of talk about her, and now the most awful thing has happened. The husband's been killed in a duel with the man who ran away with her."

This was his friend's answer. Thus they all conspired against poor Susan's happiness; all these strong ones of the earth, who knew nothing of temperaments, nothing of the result of upbringing such as hers, nor of the inheritance of blood in her veins, who possessed neither her siren charm nor her intelligent, stirring brain, who, exposed to none of her temptations, accepted life as it seems without exploring themselves or their motives or the meaning of life. Thus the world arraigned itself on the side or ignorance, and attempted to strike the woman that was down, to crush Lady Susan to earth.

These were days of luxury to the Contessa Figi, who eyed the Palazzo Sapponi triumphantly every time her carriage passed that way.

It was characteristic of Sledmere that he sat down immediately and wrote to his friend:

"Your letter will, of course, be considered quite confidential. I know nothing about the lady, but one thing I can assure you, on my honour, and that is, that she did not go away with anyone."

After he had written this, Sledmere wondered if he had been rash. He was going entirely on what she had told him, it had never occurred to him to disbelieve her, and she was alone now. He hated himself for allowing the thought to dwell even for an instant, that perhaps she had left Lori. No, of course she hadn't, she had never seen him even, gone straight away from the Cardinal.

It was most unfortunate, that episode with the Cardinal, but he himself put it all down to a childish infatuation. He, in his simple way, that precluded the sounding of depths, yet in a sense understood her better than all of them.

Notwithstanding the vague doubt in his mind, he allowed the letter to go.

When his friend, the first secretary of Embassy, read it, he smiled to himself.

It was so like good old Sledmere, he was so old-fashioned and chivalrous. Just the kind of man to get caught in the toils of an adventuress.

CHAPTER XI

" I HAVE always been very fond of her ; she's had such an odd bringing-up, but she's good as gold."

Miss Prym, sitting in the garden with Sledmere, while Julian and Susan paced up and down at the foot of the garden, beneath the shade of a row of flowering linden trees, uttered these words in her precise little way, which made all she said so emphatic.

She didn't know that she hadn't at all felt this a few days ago, and that Julian Vandegger had completely overturned the state of her mind, altered it. Susan had appealed to him once to be always her friend, and he had indeed been one.

Apart from his admiration for Susan, standing by her now in this awful trouble seemed to undo some of the mischief of having allowed her and Lori to meet in the studio ; in a way atoned for what he often called to himself the infamy of having borrowed her face for the Sapho picture.

And her words fell pleasantly, like the notes of soft music or the tinkling splash of water, on Sledmere's ears.

He did so want her to be good. His widest experience being of horses, he had always told himself that she had "a good eye."

Miss Prym looked so eminently respectable sitting there in her short white dress, with a carnation pinned into the bosom of her dress. The coral pink matched the grey white of her hair.

He listened patiently to her long tale of Susan's surroundings.

"So much *impedimenta*," she went on, borrowing from Shakespeare. The word delighted him. "First, that dreadful American upbringing, then her mother living away from her father . . . so sad . . . then, of course, so much money, so beautiful,—such a lovely face, isn't it ?"

"She's awfully pretty. 'Pon my word, I don't know when I've seen such a pretty face."

Sledmere slid this in between Miss Prym's remarks, as if it were of no importance in the career of Susan Roach, when in reality it was the whole thing. Without that wonderful, bewitching face nothing would have happened as it did, least of all would she have attracted Sledmere. The Carys needed beauty as the anæmic need iron and phosphates.

"Then, of course, staying with the Cardinal was a mistake, but it was her mother's doing ; we all thought it strange, but she somehow made it seem natural. Such a grand, magnificent man, they think so much of him at the Vatican, but of course just because he was a priest, don't you know——"

"Oh well, it's all over now, and I only hope that she'll settle down quietly. She'll marry again, of course."

The eyes of Miss Prym and Lord Sledmere accompanied each other in the direction of where Susan and Vandegger stood still now in earnest conversation.

"I don't believe I shall ever get over it," she was saying to Julian. "Do you know, now I feel as if I had loved him deeply—Rinaldo, I mean, as if it were he that I missed, not——" she hesitated a moment.

"You remember how I told you that I was in love with His Eminence. I thought that he was the only man that understood me, and now . . . . it's so strange, isn't it? I feel as if I almost hated him—he is so hard," she added.

"Oh, well, a Cardinal of Rome——"

Far away, under the lindens, with the fragrance of honeysuckle and oleander wafted towards them, Julian and Susan talked.

"I want to send some flowers. . . ."

"I'll take them when I go back."

"It was so good of you to come. . . . You have indeed proved yourself my friend."

The murmur of their voices irritated Sledmere while he tried to enter into all that Miss Prym was telling him. He wished Miss Prym had come alone. He liked Julian Vandegger, he wasn't at all what he had imagined artists are like—not at all—but he couldn't see what he had to do with it all. Surely he didn't imagine that Susan would marry him when her mourning was over.

" What she needs is a really strong, devoted man to look after her," Miss Prym went on. " She thinks she is so independent, able to look after herself, and I never saw anyone so made for love. I have always said that if she could have met a really nice Englishman and settle down, she'd be the most domestic creature on earth."

It was just what he thought, but he did hope that she wouldn't settle down with that man. He felt a dual feeling of scorn for the foreigner, the artist, and the fear of his fascinations. Women did take such odd fancies to people, and this girl-widow . . . well, she was at least original. A nice English girl like that, who could have fallen in love with a Roman Catholic Cardinal, and marry an Italian—there was no knowing what she might do.

" I've always said," Miss Prym went on, in her precise monotone, which yet was not prosy because every now and then she said something unexpected and brisk, which reminded one of a boy rattling a stick against bars from left to right—" that there's nothing on earth like an English girl—and all said and done, she *is* an English girl; he, her father, is one of the old peers, you know," she dropped her voice confidentially, almost mysteriously, "and blood is thicker than water. She is English, and she must right herself. I wish she could meet one of our dear, nice Englishmen."

She ignored the fact that she was talking to a "dear, nice Englishman." To her, Sledmere seemed out of court, since he was mixed up in all this sad business. It would have to be (so Miss Prym thought) someone quite new, who knew nothing, someone in England . . . far away, who took her at her own valuation. She talked to Sledmere as if he were a doctor who knew the symptoms of Susan Roach's disease, unaware that she was pushing on a romance.

Now and then he felt himself jump, as it were, startled by the odd feelings this "dear old body"—that was what he called Prym to himself—aroused in him.

He was too simple-minded to imagine that she was talking at him. She wasn't, as a matter of fact. She had an instinct that he was too shocked by it all to think of Lady Susan in that way. She didn't know anything about him—he might be married for aught she knew, but she recognised that he was a gentleman, and Sledmere grew restless listening to her.

It was all enlightenment, but he couldn't think what on earth she could find to talk about with this artist. It looked as if they had been very intimate, these two, and he didn't know how jealous he was of her past. He didn't know that the underlying instinct in him desired to lift her right out of the past, the past which was so hideous and so unnatural to an English girl.

"I wish to goodness she'd go and live in England," he exclaimed once.

"Of course, that would be the best thing, but . . . well, she is not in sympathy with her father. He's a cold stick, or he would have fetched her away from Rome, have looked after her. I think that we are a little wanting in warmth." She appealed for approval of her sentiment to Sledmere.

"I suppose we do seem so, but. . . We can't express ourselves as the foreigners do, we're not excitable enough." Sledmere was beginning to wish that he was more excitable.

"No, I suppose not, and Lady Susan's all excitability, all nerves, and yet thoroughly good." She was unconsciously echoing Vandegger's words. "She's thoroughly good at heart," Vandegger had said.

"No one's looked after her," Miss Prym went on; "a fine character, capable of great things, of sacrifice. . . . I think she would work her hands to the bone for anyone she loved. It's just that, don't you know, she hasn't met the right man. I love Rome, but

I always say that no English girl should marry a foreigner."

From sheer impatience of her long parley with Julian Vandegger, Sledmere got up to go. He liked old Prym, she was so English to the core in spite of her apartments in Rome, but he had had enough of her.

"I'm going back to England to-morrow," he told Miss Prym. "Of course, if I could be of any use I'd stay, but now that she's got you"—he was going to add, "and Mr. Vandegger"—"I feel that she's all right."

It was only when he stood up and looked so handsome, that Miss Prym felt a fleeting regret that Susan hadn't met a man like him.

Sledmere hadn't an idea of how irritated he was. What on earth could she find to talk about to the artist fellow all this time? He was aware that he would get back late to the hotel dinner. They would keep it for him, of course, serve it at any time at his solitary table, which he had grown to hate, but considering what pals they had become, and that she knew he was going away. . . What he failed to realise was that she was ashamed in his presence, that she had the courage to speak to each one alone, to Julian, to Miss Prym, to Sledmere, but when she mingled with them as a group she felt like a naughty child, as if she had done dreadful things, and that they all blamed her.

Sledmere got up and walked towards Lady Susan. This was his good-bye. Julian had the good taste to disappear. He exchanged places with Sledmere, and walked across the garden to take the Englishman's vacated seat next to Miss Prym. This new man in Susan's landscape filled him with wonder, yet there was nothing inharmonious in his presence. She needed men like this one about her. They belonged to her world, to her surroundings. He had never misjudged his position with Lady Susan. She had completely placed it that day in his studio when she had said, "What, of you and me ?"

If there had been a score of them around her it would have only seemed natural. She was in her right setting with men like this. She, the foremost in the picture of his imagination, should have many such in the background. Kings and princes might make up the crowd, and a Cardinal of Rome was amongst them. . .

"I've come to say good-bye."

The wistfulness in his eyes passed unnoticed, because Susan fancied that he despised her, that he did not understand.

"Must you really go ?"

She looked at him so straight, that he felt as if he were lying to her. The tone of her voice made her words sound as if she had said, "Are you really deserting me ?"

"I'm afraid I must. . . ." There was a

pause, then: "If I thought I could be of the slightest use . . . but you have your friends."

She did not detect the jealousy in his accents. Instead, she seemed to detect relief—he wanted to get away.

"You've been so awfully good to me." She sank on to a stone seat, and he seated himself beside her. Both realised that he had never been so close before.

"Good? It's been such a pleasure. . . . I only wish that I could do something."

"Oh, there's nothing anyone can do for me; it's got to be horrible like this for ever and ever." She hated his going, but how could she say to him, "Stay, because your being near somehow comforts me."

"You mustn't talk like that." How often he had said this to her. "In time, you know, you'll feel differently, and it will always be a comfort to you that you meant to go back."

She looked up, her eyes brightening almost to excitement.

"You do believe that, don't you; you do understand? That's the only thing I have to live upon. I meant to go back. . . . I meant to do my duty."

"I'm sure you did."

He spoke almost enthusiastically. Miss Prym's words hung about him still, "She's good as gold."

"If only everyone else would believe that.

Instead, they all hate me; think I've killed him. Oh, poor Rinaldo. . . if I could bring him to life again at this moment. . . And his mother—you don't know how I'd like to go to his mother, but she will never see me. They all hate me; they will hate me till they die, or I die. Do you know, I wish that I were dead. I bring nothing but harm and sorrow to everyone."

He longed to comfort her, but her own words brought everything up again so. Something far down within urged him to throw his arms around her, to tell her: "You've brought nothing but happiness and charm to me, brought me love. . . ." But all his traditions, his up-bringing, his Britishness, his ideals, his standards of right and wrong, his inborn fancies of what the woman of his choice would have to be, paralysed his impulses.

"I wish you could know my mother," he stammered, "she'd be such a help to you, I know."

Lady Susan gave one of the derisive and scoffing little laughs of the old days.

"Your mother! Good heavens, she'd think me something awful!"

The truth in what she said made something fall like lead upon his heart.

"Not if she knew all about it."

She turned almost fiercely upon him.

"And how is anyone like her to know all

about it? I don't know myself how it all came about. I didn't mean to do any harm to anyone, and yet it looks as if I had harmed everybody. Oh, it's so awful!"

She covered her face with her two hands with the gesture he was beginning to know, and her despair moved him.

"I never knew a girl so made for love," Miss Prym had said, and he felt instinctively the healing power of love, the healing power of a man's real love for a woman abased, which, while it is so rare, yet resembles the love of the Christ for a sinning world. The whole mystery of redemption and eternity, of creation, of life, lies in that; the tenderness of the strong for the weak, of the righteous, immaculate, for the sinner . . . but because of the hardness of men's hearts the law of Moses prevails.

All the welling-up, overflowing sympathy of Sledmere's heart, all his love—for he had begun to love Susan without knowing it—was turned into the hard iron mould of good form, and traditions of respectability. The substance within was plastic and yielding and quivering with emotion, but the mould paid no heed to that.

This was not the right girl for him to marry—there was too much behind her, around her. Perhaps in the future to come——

She raised her face again.

"Don't think too hardly of me."

"Hardly . . . ?"

His voice sounded as if he had no hard feelings, yet she felt so keenly that he disapproved. She got up from her seat and walked with him to the garden gate. Once there, she went on down the flower-scented lane. Once she stood still and spoke passionately,

"I'm not bad, I know I'm not bad, but what would mean nothing with others, somehow turns out all wrong for me—becomes so important. If Rinaldo hadn't been killed no one would have said anything."

"It does seem a shame, really it does." He longed to say more, but speech died away on his lips.

"Oh, if only I could begin all over again, now that I understand, if I could live all through from the beginning! Oh, I wish I had stayed in America; there's something so simple and good in America, and the men all understand so well." She told him now in her irresponsible manner all about the American —about Morton Riddell.

"He wanted me to go back with him, and I wouldn't—I was dazzled, dreaming as usual, I suppose. I didn't want to go back till I got "good and ready," and he wouldn't wait. I wish I had now, they're the only ones who really understand girls."

Sledmere groaned inwardly. It was the first time she had mentioned this American man. How many were there ?

For an instant she loomed again as a brazen woman in the Bible, the scarlet woman.

" I think perhaps I'll go back to America. It's the best place for women."

" Wouldn't that be a thousand pities ? "

He didn't know why he said this ; he wanted to say so much more and didn't dare. He would have to go away and think out things before he knew what to say.

" I don't see why, or what it matters. Of course, there's the lake. . . . Teddie and I have talked it over."

" It's awfully wicked to talk like that."

He tried to smile at her—he wasn't afraid of her threat. She was too glowing with life, as she stood there on the dusty road in her black dress, talking to him.

" It might be, in someone else, but when one's done all the dreadful things I have, one thing more or less——"

The despair in her voice, the quiver, the recklessness, pained him.

He ought to make an effort to restrain her, but he felt so powerless.

" If ever I can be of use to you, this is the address that always finds me." He handed her his card, with some printed addresses scratched out, and others written in ink.

She smiled as she took the card.

Was it likely that when he left her now, in her great sorrow, that she would ever send for him ?

"Good-bye."

The tone of her voice conveyed that a multitude of things was passing in her mind.

There was an attempt at aloofness in her voice, which did not mislead him quite, though it hurt.

She nodded at him with a smile, as he raised his hat and turned away.

For one instant she looked after him. Then she raised the front of her skirt and ran back to the *châlet.* The only real friends she had were there.

At the turning of the road Sledmere looked back. She had not watched for him, therefore she did not care.

His adventures on foreign soil had come to an end.

PART II

CHAPTER XII

FIVE YEARS LATER.

"CAN you tell me who that is coming downstairs?"

Just as Strand had asked once at the American Embassy in Rome who his sister was, so to-day Phillip Arbuthnot asked who she was, the beautiful woman, the strangely beautiful woman, who, resplendent in jewels, was descending the stairs of one of the most exclusive of English houses.

It seemed as if many of the guests asked themselves or each other this question, as Susan came down gracefully, slowly, yet with an air of reverie about her; as if she did not notice her surroundings, was oblivious of all else except the thought which occupied her mind.

There is nothing which so enhances a woman's beauty, if she is graceful, as that movement of coming down a wide staircase, and when there is an accompaniment of music, as there was to-night, when the staircase has become a gallery of flowers, and the figures in the background belong to the smart world, the world of decorated statesmen, and well-dressed women and girls. The brilliancy of light everywhere seemed yet to have centred itself around her. The gold-red hair caught the light, and looked for an instant like flames of glory, flames which vied with the sparkling blaze of the emerald and diamond dragon fly nestling between the soft curls which were all her own, while the dress which clung almost heavily to her frame and outlined the curve of the hips and the long sweep of limb, was scintillating with sequins which quivered with reflected light, quivered and shimmered at every step she took.

Instinctively, others going up and coming down stood back to let her pass, giving place as it were to her beauty, while close behind her walked a tall, good-looking Englishman, who must be a popular, well-known man, judging by the way he bowed to this one, nodded to that one, and stopped to chat a moment with men and women he knew well. In the corner of the wide, crowded hall a Royal Academician watched her progress and wished he could paint her portrait just as she looked now, coming down the stairs, a vision of sublimity stooping to converse with mortals in golden whispers.

"No, I don't know. I've never seen her anywhere before, have you?" The man who had been asked turned to another man who was passing them. "Do you know who that is?"

There was no misunderstanding whom he meant by "that."

"Lady Sledmere."

The man passed on.

"Lady Sledmere."

Phillip Arbuthnot had never heard of her, and he was a man who went everywhere. Of course, one knew that there was a Lord Sledmere, but how was it posssible that there could be a woman as wonderful as this, somewhere, and everyone not know it? In silence the two men watched her come down the stairs. At the foot of the staircase, Sledmere took from her the tiny scrap of paper she extracted from her glove, and went to fetch her cloak.

Apparently she didn't know many people, as she stood there without speaking to anyone, half shyly, half proudly waiting for him.

"Good-looking," said the man next to Phillip Arbuthnot, but Phillip Arbuthnot didn't answer. He didn't know if she were good-looking or not. It didn't seem to him that there was anything one could say of her, no adjective that one could apply to her. She was a sensation, unlike anything he had ever seen before.

Where had Sledmere found her? He had met Sledmere somewhere, and thought him a good chap, but not in any way out of the common. Of course there would be tragedy in the end, unless she was soulless—and no one looking at her proud, beautiful face could think her soulless. Phillip Arbuthnot believed in tragedy as the portion of every beautiful woman married to the typical Englishman. He had travelled a great deal, and adored women of many nationalities, and come to the conclusion that everywhere women, mentally, were stronger than men, and that no interesting woman could be happy with a typical Englishman. He didn't consider himself a typical Englishman; he felt very cosmopolitan. This woman, Lady Sledmere, was a product—the product of many warring bloods, and of the twentieth century, and he didn't see how she could be happy with such a typical Englishman as Sledmere seemed to him.

If she was, then there was something wanting—she merely loved fine clothes. Those were the really happy women, the ones whose rhapsodies ran to chiffons. And this woman had the face of a Sibyl. She would look out on the world with the same half-wondering, half-understanding look from beneath rags.

He wanted to be introduced, yet he held back. An epicure in adventure, he wanted the introduction to come about naturally, and not to be forced. It amused him to see the way Sledmere fussed about her, the way he helped her on with her cloak and fumed because the carriage wasn't there. They were talking to each other, husband and wife, and he wondered what she was saying. He had doubts as to whether the man, this man, would ever respond to her in the key she needed, when a stentorian voice called out, "Lady Sledmere's carriage stops the way," and he was conscious of the yet existing disappointment, at the feeling that everything about them was just like anybody else: almost a feeling of jealousy, of brute jealousy, that Sledmere should be shut up in a brougham with such a woman.

The next day and the next, he set himself the task of finding out who Lady Sledmere had been, without seeming to do so.

His task was rendered more easy by the fact that all London was talking about her. No one in London had ever seen her before, yet in an instant she had leaped into notoriety, the notoriety which she had avoided so steadily for five years.

When she found out that she was being talked about, she said whimsically to Sledmere,

"I seem to be a sort of human advertisement, don't I? I am sure that in my next reincarnation I shall be a sandwichman. In Rome it was 'Lady Susan and the Cardinal.' Now it's Lady Susan without the Cardinal, or do you think that it's Lady Sledmere ? "

She didn't say this to Sledmere, because it was a thought which nauseated her, but what she had never been to anyone, vitally, was the Duchessa d'Ostia, and yet it was as Rinaldo's wife that she had suffered most. She was jealous for Rinaldo now that he was dead.

And because he knew that it was the source from which he could gather everything he wanted to know, Phillip went assiduously to call on the Duchess of Bradford. Her daughter had married a Roman prince, and she knew everything.

" My dear Phillip, I can tell you everything —everything about her ; at least, all that one can humanly know. What one can't understand is the marriage with Sledmere, and—and that everyone receives her—everyone does. There are always things like that in each century—remarkable things which make one believe in the supernatural.

" She was once, though everyone seems to forget it, the wife of the Duca d'Ostia ; his mother won't have anything to say to her. She was also once under the protection of one of the Cardinals—an extraordinary story. This Cardinal knew her mother, and she threw him over and married Vermoyle, a lifeless stick, a frozen Englishman. I remember meeting his wife, and she was glorious—a sort of Wagner opera woman, beautiful and so lovable. She couldn't stand Vermoyle; I don't wonder, he's like the stick of a firework after the firework has burnt out. She was a Catherine wheel,—isn't that the word? All gay and fizzy. She couldn't stand him, and took this girl, Sledmere's wife, to America. She's rolling in money—the Carys always look after 'the Carys.' Then she married a Roman duke, and he was killed defending her name,—some horrible, corrupt Roman count, who had committed every enormity.

"The mystery lies in her marriage with Sledmere and in something far more extraordinary,—she adores her husband and lives the simple life. Of course, one can't help wondering how long it will last. The odd thing is, that his mother and sisters are devoted to her, and say there is no one on earth like her. She is only six-and-twenty, and Sledmere her second husband: she's lived a hundred lives. Of course, by the time she's thirty-five she'll be the mistress of an emperor . . . one feels that that can be the only ending—unless she dies. She's got three lovely children . . . all the great artists have painted them. She sends them to school with the village children—has theories on brotherly love, don't you know, and pretends she doesn't mind smells, while she has two perfumed baths a day,—you know the kind of woman. Only the Renaissance in France and the twentieth century in England could have produced such a type; the kind of woman who damns the Suffragette cause because she wouldn't have a vote to save her soul, and winds all the men round her little fingers. They say Sledmere understands her. I hope he does. She declares, so I'm told, that she hates notoriety—and every step she takes is a flashlight. I'm so delighted that I live in the twentieth century. It's *the* century to live in. The next will be all in the air, flying machines, don't you know, and damp clouds, all experiments and theories and rush, and the horrible cataclysms. I hate to think of my grandchildren being caught up on steeples, and, falling into Catherine wheels, going on whizzing. Take my word for it, this is the last material century before the crash comes, and I'm living it thoroughly, up to the hilt. All the women have grown so sensible, and love's so obsolete, that one feels that folly and madness must be the next step."

The Duchess's conversation was like a motor, and Phillip Arbuthnot felt for one instant as if he hoped she might be arrested. Like all motorists, she had missed all the grand scenery and the pretty peeps on the way; she whirled him through cities of thought as if she were a magnetic stream passing through precipitous gorges and he was quite sure that to appreciate Lady Sledmere you would have to walk with her along river banks and through groves of olive trees or in vineyards—you couldn't possibly "fix her" at once. The fateful lines of the cheeks, the sweeping eyelash, the long neck, the proud, decisive poise of the head, all these did not belong to hurry and scurry; yet the Duchess spoke of her as if she were a new scientific invention that defied the elements. In his mind's eye he pictured her a beautiful piece of scenery, with magnificent bridges, expressing at once the ingenuity of the modern engineer and the device of the crowning arch that crosses an ancient river, coursing still, musical and enthralled, regardless of modernity as the river is of novel methods, harking back in memory to when old boats danced on its bosom, and the fisherman threw in his net in the moonlight, cognisant of the tides.

What he wondered most was where he would see her again. He had the artistic feeling that such a woman must not be seen constantly.

And in the brougham Susan lay back, physically and mentally tired. It had been a terrible step, this appearing in public in the London world as Lady Sledmere. She was excited, and yet she had loathed it.

Presently she stretched out her hand and clasped her husband's.

"I've done what you wanted, Aubrey, but you mustn't ask me to do it again . . . I couldn't. It's nearly killed me."

Sledmere's grip of her hand tightened. He was glad that she felt like this; he had been afraid, yet the fact that she spoke like this frightened him. It wasn't quite natural. Even he, who said he didn't like society, had enjoyed it, revelled in the effect she had produced. Surely, surely, she must have enjoyed the admiration.

"Don't you see, Aubrey, that if you took me about much, it would all begin again—I would grow to love it and get mixed up in something or other. My one chance is to stay at home. I am so happy with you and the children—why force me to go out? Oh, it reminded me of so many things"—she covered her face with her hands with that gesture he knew so well, and he wondered if she regretted still.

"I want you to get accustomed to it."

She turned almost fiercely upon him.

"You don't see, you don't understand. I can't get accustomed to things, not these kind of things. They spur me on to terrible things always. The music, the smell of the flowers, the dances, everything,—oh, I can't tell you the effect it all has upon me. It reminds me of such dreadful things, terrible things, and yet—oh, it fascinates me. No, Aubrey, dear, let's go on with the simple life. It isn't safe, I tell you, to take me out. I hate it, and yet—oh, I feel that one day it might take hold of me again!"

"Goodness knows that I'm satisfied with our life, that I don't want to go about, only of course one mustn't let all one's friends slip out of one's life."

She smiled, but in the darkness he didn't see her smile. It was so wonderful to see the *rôles* reversed, to hear "good old Aubrey," as his friends called him, enjoying a party in London, when hitherto he had always shunned them, hidden himself away in the country, or on a Scotch moor.

It proved, she thought, that he was happy. It gave her a little passionate thrill of joy to think that she made him happy—she who till now had only brought disaster on all she came across, she said exaggeratedly. It was wonderful that she was able at last to make a man happy, to devote herself to him. What she could not fully explain, even to him, was her fear of relapsing, her fear of being attracted again towards the storm, the stress and glory of the roaring gale. How she loved the sound of it, while yet her spirit was resting now—"resting from all my wild oats"—she still said recklessly to herself. There were the children, three beautiful babies, and it would be dreadful for them if she listened to the voice of the storm. She was devoted to them, but a great part of the time they were asleep, or out with their nurses. She knew that they didn't suffice her.

"Nor does anything that I can have," she had said once to herself, mischievously.

She knew instinctively that the life she was leading was not the one to suit her, that in a sense it was true that she was resting from her sowing of wild oats, that it was the fearful memories of the past which made her acquiesce in all this almost pastoral life they were leading. Yet, mercifully, she was afraid to change it. The peace of it all was soothing; her excitability was lulled and calmed by it, though not extinguished. It was the knowledge of a burning, unextinguishable flame within her, the fire which caught here and there at adventure and fed on it greedily, which frightened her. She knew her husband; there was something so fresh and clean about him, something so different to all those who had hovered around her past years. She respected him, and they were friends . . . she felt an immense gratitude to him for having married her with that "awful past," yet she felt instinctively that there were others who could appeal to her more. There was the clash of strong spirit with strong spirit missing in her life, and she had felt to-night some of the old eagerness for it. It had been aroused by the admiration she had seen in the eyes of the men who had been introduced to her—for she knew so few Englishmen that it had been an evening of introductions. The new admiration from a new fellow creature, how enthralling it was! "Like new clothes," she had said once: however pretty the last dress has been, even if it is more becoming, how one loves one's self in a new dress!

Had she been a great writer, a great musician, a great painter, she would have enjoyed the absorption of her enemies; and she might have been either of these, but health had not encouraged toil, and all her energies had been employed instead in the study of emotion and sensation. Since her marriage it had become her habit, when the temptation of restlessness assailed her, to conjure up the memory of Rinaldo, and with her mind's realistic imagination she could picture him sometimes lying dead there on the plain of the campagna, or lying in state on the bed of their room in the Palazzo d'Ostia, with lights burning at the foot, and praying nuns, and his mother, broken-hearted, yet dry-eyed, controlling her grief with Roman, imperious dignity, while the sorrow in her congealed and stiffened with hate for her, Susan, who had killed her son. When this vision came before her, she could not bear it; she would get up and pace the room or go out into the open air, whatever the weather. But to-night she had forgotten him, Rinaldo, been carried away by the dazzle and brilliancy of it all, and life and gladness once more demanded their innings. To-night she would have liked to dance—to dance all night, so that the weary body satisfied should quench the spirit, the storm-spirit. Suddenly, once the thought had come to her insistent, that while she had been seeking sensation she had been cheated of all life's pleasures, or rather she had cheated herself of all the innocent ones. She felt still a child, a child who has been denied all the toys it craved for, and been obliged to play with strange, unchildlike toys, fire-arms, swords, sunbeams, anything that came to hand. And now that she was, as she expressed it, "a stately dame," and it was too late, she wanted to go back and be a girl again, full of life and innocent pleasure, as she had been really before she came to Rome, before she became so absurd . . . yes, now she saw that all she had done and thought and felt had been grotesque, even her love for her *Magnificenza*—she didn't love him any more.

"No, I suppose not," she answered her husband, "and yet, you know, I don't believe I can take it simply, as you do. . . I've got to keep in a groove, then I can go on. The minute I step out of it——"

"Oh, nonsense!" Sledmere spoke almost crossly. He hated to hear her talk like this. It revived all the old fear, the fear that had made him leave her when Miss Prym and Julian Vandegger had arrived, the fear which had still pulsed when he had asked her to be his wife, the fear which had followed him to the altar and made the words "for better and for worse" sound as if fraught with prophetic meaning as the thought flashed, "What would the outcome be?" The fear which he knew was always with him, always, even when she sat and played with the children, or lay next his heart; the fear which at once added and deducted from the delight in her, lest at any moment the storm-passion should seize her, and she should leave him as she had left Rinaldo, leave him to go out into the storm, perhaps accompanied, perhaps alone . . . or perhaps to do something terrible.

He was like a man always watching for the recurrence of a fit of mania that may seize one he loves.

Was it true that she had once said, "You know, Aubrey, the real reason why you don't get tired of me is because I always keep you on pins and needles, on the watch?"

And he had assured her solemnly that it was not the case, that he would love her still more if he were sure of her. But she didn't believe him. It was this fear of her which made him so "un-English" in his devotion, and to-night she was aware that the fear had revived, not during the party, but now awakened by her words, and it made him irritable because it showed him that the old spirit was there which could not be quailed—and he wanted to take her about, to show her to everyone, and yet not to be afraid.

"Oh, don't talk like that." She sat up now in the carriage and faced him, and took hold of his shoulders and shook him, and he laughed.

"Apologise at once," she said to him.

"I won't apologise, but I'll kiss you."

As their lips met, the storm-spirit slunk away, the evil mood was dispelled.

"I certainly have educated you well; no one would think you were an Englishman." She laughed.

"H'm."

She knew that that grunt meant he thanked the Lord that he wasn't a foreigner.

"You've just saved the whole situation by that kiss," she told him, "just saved yourself and me."

Why was it that, although he had been dead now for a year, she missed the sight of Teddie in the hall?

Was it because he belonged to the past which had been so revived to-night, that when she had last been decked out in finery he had been there?

"Oh, how I do miss Teddie," she sighed, as she opened her letters lazily, while Aubrey took off her cloak and handed it to a servant. She was not aware even that he understood, only to-night Teddie came and stood within the range of her thoughts.

"I must get you another," he said, following her upstairs.

"Oh, no! I never want another . . . . There never could be another Teddie——"

The jealousy of her past, of those she had loved and who had loved her, rose within. Together they passed into the nursery, and leaned over the sleeping children.

The child had uncovered itself, and its little limbs lay exposed to the night air.

With the wonderful mother-gesture, Susan drew the coverings over it and placed the child comfortably, and tucked it up. The movement woke a thrill of passion and tenderness within him, and laid his fears to rest.

She was too good a mother, she would never go out into the storm—not now. His arm was around her as they left the semi-darkened nursery.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT sometimes amused Susan, what now and then aroused a little bitterness, was the way her father and brother treated her now that she was, to use her own language "just like everybody else." It was sickening, she told herself, the way they all approved of her marriage with Sledmere.

"Just as if I wasn't the same Susan, as if marrying him made really the least little particle of difference."

She forgot that then she had needed them, that now she did not need them. They that are whole need not a physician, yet how ready friends are to befriend one when one is whole! Nothing aroused more the latent cynicism in Susan than this readiness of her father and brother to be good to her, now that she was out of reach of scandal. It was when she was passing through sorrow and disillusion and shame that she had needed them, not now. When she wanted to purge her soul of bitterness, she would think of Miss Prym and of Julian Vandegger. Yes, there were good, kind souls in the world, but just the fact that out of all her relations, all her friends and acquaintances, only these two had stood by her, seemed to emphasize the heartlessness of all the rest.

She didn't know that she owed even her marriage to those two—"dear old Prym" and "that Belgian chap" as her husband called Vandegger—to all the nice things they had said of her, the two who understood her better than everyone else, though none perhaps could ever quite understand her. She owed it to them, and to the chastened spirit that had come over her, to the quiet life she had led with old Prym after Julian Vandegger returned to Rome.

"Just what I always said," she had told Lord Sledmere when they met again, "perfectly content to sit at her embroidery, and go out with her dog. Such a child really, provided she has someone with her who understands her."

Yes, it did look as if Susan was satisfied with very little in the simple English cottage belonging to friends of Miss Prym, to which they had gone when they grew tired of Switzerland. But then, no one knew the shock Rinaldo's death had been, the bitterness of her remorse, even if the bitterness were fleeting. She was dazed, and Switzerland, beautiful though it was, had become too melodramatic for her mood.

"I've never been in England since I was a child, but I've read so much about those simple villages. Couldn't we go and live in one, Prymmie dear?"

Being called "Prymmie dear" by Lady Susan thrilled the old maid; it was the nearest approach to being called "Mother" that she would ever attain to. And they had gone to a simple, old-fashioned village in Kent, and the complete change from foreignness had entranced Susan; she took a passionate interest in the little children and in the hop-pickers.

It was fate, Miss Prym declared, that had made them take a cottage which was on the very borders of the property of a cousin of Sledmere, and that he was staying with them. He had heard his cousins talking of a most lovely girl who had taken Briar Cottage and who motored every day and whom everybody declared was some foreign royalty in disguise. "Probably some Austrian archduchess," his aunt, who was romantic, had told him, "but perfectly lovely. They say that the village people adore her."

How could he think that it was Susan, seeing that he imagined her at Aeschi? She had told him that she had had to take the *châlet* for a year; it was not one of those that are usually let, its luxury proclaimed this, and the owners, fully aware of this unparalleled chance of obtaining a high price, had made a condition that it should be let for a year.

In his mind's eye he imagined her still there, chaperoned by Miss Prym.

There had been no interchange of letters.

A hundred times he, Sledmere, had been on the point of writing to her, and each time something he could not account for held him back. Perhaps it was the Scotch cautiousness he had inherited from his mother.

With her it was with intent; he had left her so abruptly—"deserted her" she called it—in the hour of her greatest need, and instinctively she felt the mistrust in him. Using an American expression she told herself that she had "no use" for men of that type, who were afraid and who imagined evil, who didn't understand, or, understanding, were shocked. She had the inward conviction of her own worth, outwardly, in appearance at all events, even if she was "bad" as everyone seemed to think, and the certainty that somewhere the man existed who could, who must understand her. But just now she had no wish to see or speak with men—man hitherto had been her evil genius and, because he was so stolidly good, Julian Vandegger did not appeal to her. She had thanked him very sweetly for all his goodness to her, but she had felt no regret at bidding him farewell.

"He's simply devoted to you," Miss Prym had said to her, but the fact had left her untouched, except by a faint gratitude. She was of the women who hold courts and who cannot be expected to notice whether they have raised the flame of love in this one or that, though they may single out favourites in the crowd. In any case the instinctive pride of birth within her, which survived the republicanism of America, would have prohibited the Lady Susan Roach, Duchessa d'Ostia, from considering " the painter man " in any other light than that of a good friend. She might have accompanied him to the scaffold if he had committed a murder, but she wouldn't marry him. In the midst of Bohemianism, she was very much an aristocrat ; her Bohemianism was in a sense the outcome of her conviction that because she was herself she could do anything.

And Julian had understood the spirit of their parting. If he loved and admired her, he must do so on his own account and expect nothing. Besides he owed her a debt of repentance, of apology, over the Sapho picture. He had paid it, and he felt better.

He had even understood that just because he belonged to the crowd of discomfort which had surrounded her in Rome, because he had lent her his studio where she had met Lori, he was more out of court than all of them.

He tried to tell himself that what he desired above everything was her happiness, regardless of his own.

Lady Susan would have laughed if he had told her this. She had lost faith in man's unselfishness. But no man mattered now.

When she met Sledmere in a lonely lane,

between hedgerows of dog-roses, she laughed mischievously.

"Oh, poor you, to come across me again!" That mystic something which makes some souls understand other souls, passed into his mind as he detected the bitterness of her words.

Teddie was barking with joy, and all the episode at the Spiezerhof returned. Each one in life has one romance, and the only telling romance of Sledmere's life had been that episode with Lady Susan. That she was looking lovely in her black tailor gown, with her red-gold hair spreading here and there in waves beneath her black hat, that she looked altogether perfect in her *soigné* chicness and rich, abundant mysticity—all this was like the illustrations for the novel of life, which makes you able more vividly to realise the heroine.

"I don't know why you should say that. I've wondered a hundred times where you were—I would have liked to write to you, but I thought——"

"You were afraid."

She threw the phrase at him, and he felt as if she had struck him and that all his fighting spirit was aroused, that he would like to strike her back, to pick up the gauntlet, only that because she was a woman and so fair he must not.

"Why do you say that? Why do you always talk of yourself as if you were dangerous?"

Even he was not aware of the new life that had come into him at sight of her, or how daring he had grown in this absence of weeks. Least of all did he know that his words meant that he wanted to eliminate the dangerous in her, the abnormal, so that he could love her.

Mentally speaking, he was clearing the ground for himself. She had never been out of his thoughts, but because of all that had happened, because of all she had told him and all he had heard, because she was not like everybody else, he wanted her to seem so for five minutes, so that he could justify himself. He was so afraid that she was a witch, while her witchery fascinated him.

"It appears that I am dangerous, though I didn't know it; the proof of it is that you are so afraid. I've taken Briar cottage. Prym and I live there and love it . . . But I didn't know that you lived anywhere near."

A sudden fear assailed her, lest he should think that she was hunting him down.

"Or you wouldn't have come, I suppose?"

The way he shifted, striking at her, aroused her.

"I don't suppose it would have made any difference."

The voice, the tone, the accent, placed him a thousand miles away, and created a passionate desire to be close, intimate with her thoughts. The fact that she repudiated him drew him.

"No, I suppose not."

Inwardly he was arguing that he must be a poor kind of male if any woman were an enigma to him.

There, with the autumn berries ripe in the hedgerow and the sun making her complexion look very English, he told himself that he was a fool. Susan could have told him that; her lovely presence did so without her speaking.

All at once he burst out laughing. His laugh did more for him than anything else—he laughed with his eyes.

"So you are the royal personage, the Austrian archduchess who has bewitched the village."

"I didn't know that I was."

He remembered suddenly all the comments that had been passed about her at his aunt's house:

"They say that she's perfectly lovely. I saw her whisk by in a motor, but you couldn't see her."

"And quite young."

"And they say that she's so wonderfully simple."

"And so kind to everybody."

"They say her face is awfully sad. . . Someone said that she was a widow."

"No, I believe she's separated, or divorced, or something."

"But it's such a beautiful, innocent face, one can't imagine that it is her fault."

All these comments rose up in his mind, as he walked beside her towards Briar cottage. But the sweet, innocent face belied all comment, enhanced what was good, and denied all other suggestions. It was so healthy, so sane, so girlish; to himself he said, "So English."

"Why did you leave Switzerland?" he asked her as they walked side by side, with no invitation on her part.

"Oh, I was sick of it, it's so unreal."

"Duchess!" They had come quite close to Briar Cottage, and it was the first time that he had called her duchess.

The appellation was a concession, since he didn't think that any woman could be a real duchess unless she was married to an English duke; and he was totally ignorant of the fact that her whole attitude seemed to imply—"you poor, dear fool."

As they came near to the cottage a panic seized him lest, because she had met him, she would go away at once.

"What made you come here?" he asked her.

"Oh, it belonged to relations of Prymmie . . . and I wanted to get away from everybody. I was tired of Switzerland."

She couldn't have come here to meet him, since he very rarely came. It was a mere accident that had brought him here now—merely that a cousin was very ill. What she said seemed to include that she didn't wish to see him again, or anyone.

He had the consciousness that if he didn't play his cards well he would lose her.

"'Pon my word, I can't bear to think of you with no one to look after you. It's hard lines, really it is."

"Hard lines seem to be my portion." She laughed, but it was a sad little laugh.

"But you won't let anyone look after you."

It was so true that she could not help laughing again. This time it was a merry laugh.

"Oh, Prymmie's a brick, she looks after me, I can tell you, with a vengeance. She is such an old dear."

"I have the greatest regard and respect for Miss Prym."

He spoke solemnly.

"I hope she's grateful."

Her words seemed to make everything he said ridiculous, and he had all the Anglo-Saxon's sensitiveness about ridicule. The American looks upon ridicule as part of the humour of life.

"I don't want her to be grateful." After a moment he added,

"I'm awfully grateful to her, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, why?"

He felt that the callousness of the question was a piece of acting.

" Just because she looks after you."

" What on earth can that have to do with you ? As a matter of fact, I look after Prym."

" Well, I'd like to ask her about that."

" Do."

" I'm going to. Look here, Duchess, it's no good beating about the bush any more."

" Oh, I'm much too tired to beat about anything." The pink glowing of her complexion seemed to deny that she had been weary.

" Anyhow, it's time you had someone to look after you."

" I quite agree there. I'm tired of looking after myself."

" Then——" still he hesitated, fearful.

" Then——" she echoed, half expectant, half scornful.

" Then really you must let me do it."

" Oh, well, if you want to. I thought you were afraid."

" So I am, but——"

" If you think you can." She spoke derisively.

" I'll try, at any rate."

" And your failure won't be worse than anyone else's."

And Prym chuckled as she saw them come up the gravel path, thinking they were made for each other.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER that it seemed to Susan as if she had entered a new cycle of life, as if the past had been a hideous nightmare, with an occasional interweaving into it of a wonderful dream which might have been glorious if only she could have pieced it together, if it could have gone on continuously and with sequence, and permitted her to understand its meaning. And what struck her most of all was the newness of experience, and the way her whole being went out to meet newness of experience with new moods.

There was something so decorous and dignified in Sledmere's wooing, now that he had made up his mind to woo, which some time ago she would have thought tame and dull, but which now appealed to her because of its want of excitement. She was weary of the adventure of love and of storm, and the weariness became rested beneath the normal sanity of Sledmere's courtship. It was as if he, too, had put away his past and renewed hers, in order that she should suit himself and reach the standards and ideals by which he had always intended to measure the woman he would marry.

He took it so for granted that she was a great lady in mind as well as by birth, beautiful in soul as well as body; that her plastic temperament moulded itself to his way of treating her. In those days he had nothing to complain of. She was gentle, and gracefully affectionate, and altogether adorable.

The only moment when the old Susan had flashed out had been when a few weeks later he proposed to her, "in the regular way," as she put it to herself, with a touch of mischief.

Of course she had understood when she met him in the lane—and by the bye his wicked terrier and Teddie had had a passage of arms unnoticed in the ditch—that he had found being away from her wearisome; but one autumn evening when everything glowed purple and brown, and yet seemed golden, when they were returning from a long walk in the neighbourhood of Tunbridge Wells, he stood suddenly still as they took a short cut through a small wood and said, taking off his hat as if the ground on which they stood had suddenly become holy (later she told herself that it was the way he had taken off his hat which had fascinated her),

"I wish Duchess—I can't call you Duchess really—I wish you'd marry me."

It was a great triumph for her, she knew it, this winning of Lord Sledmere's love, after all that had gone before, and she felt the thrill of triumph before the impulse of love. Then as she looked at the handsome face, a deep humility took possession of her.

"Are you not afraid?"

She held out one hand to him, appealing as it were to his protection, so that he should forget fear.

"Of course I am dreadfully afraid." He was smiling at her, so that she could not read if he were speaking in fun or in earnest, but he knew that he was speaking in earnest, while he tried to reassure her. He *was* afraid, but the fear of her fascinated him. She had made all other women seem colourless, tame, uninteresting. He had been bored to death since he had left her, and immensely relieved when he heard of Vandegger's departure.

"But I'll take my chance."

It did her good to hear him say that, while for an instant it transferred his fear to herself. Then it was that the old Lady Susan spoke, spoke out frankly to recklessness, although doing so might ruin her future, dash the cup of happiness from her lips just as she stooped to sip it.

"I wonder if you know what that chance is. Of course I'll do my best to keep straight but. . . . Oh, you don't know how something spurs me on always to do extraordinary things! I've loved the calm here at Briar Cottage. Oh, you don't know how I've longed for peace;

but it's quite on the cards, you know, that I shall get dreadfully tired of peace presently, as I do of everything and everybody. I might even get tired of you."

Sledmere was not a conceited man, as men go, but where is the man who does not fancy that he will be able to guide the woman he loves? How long that fancy lasts after marriage, varies, no doubt, according to the temperaments of the couples, but notwithstanding that her words jarred, he remained standing at his post, conscious now that if he wished to do so he could not go back, and unconsciously also growing excited at the thought of his own daring, as if he knew that he was taking a leap in the dark and that he must not complain if he bruised himself.

And with the excitement awoke a new courage, a courage inciting to dominate mentally as he had often dominated the waywardness of a horse.

She was right, Susan, when she said that she had educated him, as he had never thought to feel like this about any woman. She had aroused his fighting strength as well as his tenderness.

"I'm not going to let you get tired of me."

Now she had grown almost absent-minded, unheeding. She was listening to her own heart and wondering if she loved him, and listening there in the wood with the late afternoon sun turning the leaves of nut trees to light green, she heard the distant growling of the storm.

Yet her mind, side-tracking, noted the abundance of little nuts in their sheaths of green, and brought a sense of being hungry with the means to satisfy, as if luncheon were being served round the corner somewhere.

Now, though it was late autumn, they seated themselves on a fallen trunk of a tree.

"You haven't said anything, you know . . . perhaps your Grace will have the goodness to answer her humble servant."

She turned her face towards him quickly.

"Oh 'your Grace,' for heaven's sake don't remind me always——" She broke off. "I haven't said anything because I've been asking myself if I really cared for you. . .You see I've thought I cared for so many people and—and now it doesn't seem to me that I have ever really cared—not—not even for the Cardinal. I have always, all my life, felt as if I had to think I cared in order to enjoy life. . .You get that way in America I think, you're so accustomed to always having a man about with you who's in love with you, that everything seems dull without one. It's the same when you have been hearing a band play at dinner time for weeks at an hotel, and suddenly dine at home. I always felt like that when we got back to my aunt's house after we had been staying at the hotel in New York——" She hesitated, and he did not speak—he felt instinctively that this was his chance to read her mind, to grow nearer to understanding her, and she went on: "And this lately seems to be the only time when I've not been in love, or at least not fancied myself to be, and I'm asking myself if I ever really shall fall in love."

It hurt him to hear her describe so clearly, so calmly, that she did not love him.

"You see"—she smiled at him—"how difficult it is for me to answer you, to say that I will marry you, because you see I don't know if I love you or not. . . Oh yes, I do like you. . ." Once more she laid her hand in his, and he gripped hold of it tight, then raised it to his lips.

"But. . .Oh, I don't know what it is about me that I can't be as other girls, know my own mind, not analysing, not wondering. I'm always seeking for something." She uttered this more emphatically and in a different tone. "I'm so afraid that *you* won't be happy. I daresay *I* shall be. Yes, I know that you'd be good to me—too good." She gave a mischievous little laugh. "I often think that the only kind of man I ought to marry ought to be one that would beat me."

"I'll beat you, if you like—if you think it would make you happy."

"Oh, how funny!"

They both laughed, then she grew suddenly grave. "You see, hitherto I've always thought of myself, never of the man; now since Ri . . . since that awful affair, I'm so afraid of making someone else unhappy. I—I—don't know if I really care for you, but I do like you enough not to want to hurt you." She spoke a little shyly.

He kept silence for a few seconds. It was not what he had hoped, and yet he told himself that he was unreasonable, that the fact that she considered it like this, reflected, and feared to hurt him, was more than she had ever given of tribute of affection or regard to those others she had told him about. It would be folly to expect this girl, laden with passionate, tragic experience, to know at once if she cared. If she had told him that she did, jumped at his proposal, as he knew (while he tried not to think so) so many other women would have done, he would not have believed her, trusted less to their chances of happiness, of his and Susan's.

"Would you like time to think it over?"

She laughed her merry laugh.

"If you give me time to think, I shall certainly not marry you. I can't tell what I shall be thinking about—my mood will have changed, probably, and the clouds have gathered over a storm. . . It's so funny your caring for the storm-child—you, of all people. You know *she* always called me the storm-child. . .

She said the poem expressed me exactly. I was born in October."

He knew by now that "she" was what she always called her mother. Her love and loyalty for her mother were amongst the things he admired most in her.

"Shall I recite it to you?"

He was not much of a poetry-lover, or if he was, he did not know it. If he thought of it at all it was as of something belonging specially to women, like flowers and pretty clothes.

Yet as she burst into the verses, without waiting for his answer, the music of the words and the music of her voice fascinated him. When she finished there was a silence which she broke.

"'The stress and splendour of the roaring gale.' How I love that line, it's much the same as the German 'Sturm und Drang' . . . Oh yes, I love the storm, but—but it would be very hard on you to take you out in it—you might catch cold."

Her scoffing words made no impression, for he was living over again the impression a storm had made upon him once long ago in Scotland. For the first time to-day the words of the poem she had recited seemed to express all he had felt then.

As they sat there a band of people he knew walked past them, and as he raised his hat Susan saw the swift colour rise to his cheeks.

The eyes of the two women rested a moment, half inquiring, half mocking, on Susan. She dug her stick into the ground in front of her and looked down after the first exchanged glance with these people who knew Sledmere.

When they had passed out of earshot, she laughed. "Can't you imagine the talk and gossip there's going to be ?"

"Yes." He spoke shortly and was visibly annoyed. "We'll have to stop it by announcing our engagement."

"Oh, is it as serious as all that ?"

Susan recoiled before being forced to engage herself on account of local gossip.

"There's been so much talk ; can't you understand that I hate it for you, that I don't want any more."

"Oh, I've always said that I felt just like the agony column in the *Morning Post*."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"There you are, you see. You can't stand the storm."

"I don't see that it's necessary."

"Well, are you going to tell me how we are to change the whole face of Nature—to check the elements ? I don't. . . . There must be storms always around this child. The only thing is to invest in two umbrellas. If we had had two umbrellas over our faces they wouldn't have known us again. How could we prevent their passing ? One couldn't know that they were coming any more than one can foretell a storm—it's part of the whole thing."

"And I want to get you out of the whole thing. . . You're so much too good and sweet for it all. I wish you'd let me announce it to-night, I mean up at my relations' place. These people know them, and——"

For an instant her whole being recoiled against being coerced into engaging herself on account of talk. It was so petty and little. Then the consciousness of triumph appealed to her again.

"Oh if you must, you must, but remember I may prove dead sea fruit."

Looking first around carefully, lest any lurking eyes might witness it, he pressed a kiss upon her lips.

"Thank you," he murmured, "and please God you'll never regret it."

"Oh you're the one most likely to regret it."

Her flippancy, after the emotion the kiss had evoked—he had kissed so few women—jarred upon him. Instinctively both rose to their feet, and Susan felt the consciousness that if they dallied a moment longer she would be bored to death.

That was how they became engaged, and when London heard of it, it shook its head, and all the tongues wagged. The mother of Rinaldo thought it infamous, and the Cardinal was silent. The only congratulatory letter from Rome was from Vandegger, still acting the part of friend. Prym was delighted; her father and brother wrote that they were delighted, and triumph coursed through her veins like music. It was good to be engaged to and loved by "a new man," as she put it, but a hundred times a day she told him that he was making a grave mistake and laying up sorrow for himself. He believed her less and less as she went on saying it. He didn't pay any attention now to what she said. Every day he fell more deeply in love. She had been to see his mother and sister, and now that it was inevitable they thought her charming and much maligned.

September passed rapidly, and she was still fascinated by the peace and the calm and sanity of his wooing. Each day she grew closer to what he wanted her to be, the great lady of controlled, calm feelings, and Prym nodded her head sagely and said, "I told you so," every time Sledmere sat alone and talked to her, and at night Susan asked herself if she were dreaming or awake, and if the peace within, the sane and the normal, were counterfeit or not. If it wasn't, then she wasn't really a storm-child, and all the past was sham.

Yet she chose to be married on her birthday, her twenty-first birthday, because it was the storm-month; and, "you see, if you give me opals—and opals are my favourite stones—they can't hurt me."

Miss Prym was sullenly set against opals, but Susan uttered with such conviction,

"Could anything harm me more than my past?"

A woman with a past!

Lately, since she had known Sledmere's sisters and mother she had wished more than once that she had not had a past. Yet she was vaguely conscious that it was her past that fascinated them, and the way her quiet and dignity belied it.

Once she felt inclined to shock them by saying something terrible, but the next moment she felt inspired on the contrary to mystify them all by her decorum, by her sanity.

"I think she has been infamously treated," his dear old mother said to him. "I am going to love her very dearly." Sledmere was confused as to whether she had ill-treated others or been ill-treated, but he felt certain that all the past was well behind her, that, to use her own figure of speech, she had sown her "wild oats."

He was prepared for squalls, but he didn't think there would be a storm. Well, if there was——. He didn't know what he could do if there was.

They were married very quietly by special licence both in the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. She wouldn't relinquish her own religious rite, though she told Sledmere that she didn't really believe in Catholicism any longer; and because it was the religion that he feared, her want of conviction pleased him when it would have been a matter of distress had she treated his in this fashion. This time her father gave her away, and her brother was present. Only a short paragraph appeared in the papers that the Earl of Sledmere had married the Duchessa d'Ostia, daughter of Lord Vermoyle and widow of the late duke.

The scurrilous paper gave a short, confused account of the first husband's death in a duel, but neither of them saw it or heard even about it.

A cousin of Sledmere's had lent them a place in the lake country for the honeymoon, which Susan limited to a fortnight.

"I couldn't stand more, Aubrey," she told him frankly, and they started life at once in his beautiful country house.

His marriage caused little comment, because it came in the dead season, and because Susan was unknown in England, and because Sledmere went out so little in London.

And the five years had passed pleasantly and without stress or storm, and in those five years their three children were born.

Now after five years it was he who tried to persuade her to go into society. He no longer feared. It was just as old Prym had said—all she needed was to settle down and marry a good, honest Englishman.

CHAPTER XV

"HULLOA! How do, Arbuthnot?"

Sledmere tried to say this in his most genial manner, and the effort he made was at once detected by Susan. It was a fortnight now since she had made her first appearance at a London party, the first since she had been presented on her marriage by Aunt Letitia. No one but Aunt Letitia knew the courage she had invoked in order to present Susan after so much talk. She declared that it made her feel most uncomfortable.

It would have been wiser perhaps if he had taken her to the country as she had asked him to do. It was always better really in the end to do as Susan wanted, because she knew what she was about. If the Cardinal had only humoured her a little more she would have gone back to Rinaldo.

Instead, that fortnight had been one headlong rush from place to place with no time to think; barely, except in bed in the morning, to write notes. Word had been carried from mouth to mouth of the beauty and grace and charm of Lady Sledmere, during a season when London was in want of something new and startling, and it would have been an impossibility to pass Susan unnoticed. The vermilion impression which had been Bianca's, and which had made the Cardinal dread to go and meet her at the station, looked less out of place here, in London, yet still did not fail of effect, of sweeping effect, in keeping with the storm-child. There was something resembling the hurricane in the way she burst upon London and whirled through that fortnight, nor did it lessen the effect that here and there people whispered of a mystery.

With her husband's devotion to pioneer her, the mystery, whatever it was, was not one to detract from her social success—not for the moment, at all events. The dominating wonder was, that one so young should once have been a widow; for it was not only that she looked young, but *was* young.

And she had three children, and had never been out in London before! Brought up in America, or Italy, or somewhere, yet Vermoyle's daughter, and apparently devoted to her husband, Sledmere—such a dear, good fellow, but quite the last man one would have imagined to fall in love with a type like Lady Susan. Of course, that she should have married him was quite natural, seeing all the stories there were afloat. Wasn't there something about the mother—ran away, or did something or other? The vagueness about what her mother had done fastened itself presently on to Susan. She had run away from her foreign husband and he had killed himself. Presently sword-thrusts reached her from Rome, reached her without hurting her, personally, because she was not aware of them, but those who had known her there or known those who did, began to piece it all together. The Boninghams were on leave for a few weeks, and in town this season. They were staunch, but they couldn't help others talking, nor shut their mouths. There was a very gossiping secretary of embassy, who covered up his ignorance of the affairs of Europe by an accurate acquaintance with the peccadilloes of well-known people. It had stood him in good stead with more than one chief, and earned for him the nickname of "The Barometer" from his *confrères*. He told everyone all that he knew, then hovered around Susan with an air of proprietorship, as if he were the impressario who had brought her from Rome, and who, although he knew that he had accomplished a daring thing, yet was going to stick staunchly to his own discovery—even if he abused it.

In the midst of confusion, Susan became conscious of criticism and comment, not because she overheard everything, but because she didn't. It was the silence of those who stood nearest when she was announced anywhere, and the effusion with which her hostess came forward to greet her, which was so damning, Susan fancied; while at times she felt an inward recoil from, almost hate of, her fellow-men and women, and at others a species of restless mischievousness tempted her to fool them by unswerving dignity, or to shock them, to justify their misgivings by some lawless act.

What she fully realised was that the peace of the last five years was being dispersed, and that while it was being replaced by something far more absorbing, she yet did not want to lose it, would not, at any cost. Presently the sensitive recognition that people were watching her began to irritate her, while the excitement of coming into contact with the outer world was beginning to fascinate her again.

Of late she had seen very little of her children, and at times, when she was chatting or listening to music, she grew suddenly grave at the thought of this. She had seen so much of them all this time, so much more than other mothers had done. It had been part of the great peace, and when the thought of them had come back to her, she would generally hurry away, probably go back to them, or if they were out, seek out Sledmere at his club—anywhere—and make him drive with her.

"I wish you would let us go back to the country; let's start to-morrow," she would say to him, and in the morning something very attractive would present itself, and they would put it off till the next day; while at one moment she argued with herself that she had a right to enjoy herself, and the next moment remonstrated with herself that it wasn't safe for her, Susan, to mix with the world, to talk to her fellow-men.

It was part of the penalty of her past that she should seek oblivion. She was not even aware that what spoiled her pleasure more than anything else, was the consciousness that, far away there in Rome, outside Rome and beyond it, a woman sat and cursed her for killing her son, and called her heartless.

And this afternoon something else struck her and gave her that sensation of drowning which had come over her before, as a girl, and which was returning now. She was seeing less of Sledmere—thinking less of him; she must take care, or he would cease to hold the place in her life he had done hitherto. He belonged to her peace, was the guardian of it, the door-keeper of the new house of repose into which she had entered, and if she did not take care, if she went out into the storm, he would become as unimportant to her as all other men had become, even her *Magnificenza*; she would forget him.

The fact that she thus subtly examined into her own feelings proved that what was best in her was stirring. Never before had she given herself the time to meditate on her own danger, or to watch fearfully those others who would be drawn down in the whirlpools made by her reckless impulsiveness.

She had grown to see of late that love is a reflection of the love we give, or the trouble we bestow; that it is a fragile thing not to be neglected or roughly treated, not at all events, till it has grown strong, become the ever fixèd mark. The trouble was, she told herself dolefully, to make it an ever fixèd mark. It's such terribly hard work. Yet to-day something in his voice that sounded weary and in his look—" he has a grey look," was the comment of his appearance which flashed—arrested her attention, filled her with curiosity.

" He doesn't like finding me here alone with Arbuthnot."

The first result of this guess at his feelings inspired the old feeling of revolt against the want of liberty, then the vision of Rinaldo flashed on the top of it, insistent. She must submit to this if she would be happy. The next instant another one took its place, like the fresh slide of a lantern.

Why should she, Susan Roach—she always called herself this to herself, adding whimsically, " it's the only name I've had long enough to grow accustomed to "—be bound down like other women? Why couldn't they give her her head? She had to have it, if they didn't. . .

She grew ashamed of her own thoughts when she thought of what she might do if they didn't give her her head. For an instant she felt that all the peace of the past years had not been natural, that she had been fretting about it—chafing ; that it had all been counterfeit of peace, as much as her love affairs, her childish storms of passionate emotion had been the counterfeit of love, of real love. What awful vistas this idea opened out ! Was she then incapable of love, and would she one day feel real love, and would it be quite different from everything else ?

All these thoughts revolved while she listened to the stilted conversation between the two men, half scoffingly, half amused.

"They are like two terriers on either side of a fence," she thought mischievously. It was so evident that the thought of her ebbed and flowed between them, a dangerous tide. Oh, how silly men were, how foolish, how stupid where women were concerned ! There was Phillip Arbuthnot imagining, no doubt, that she was beginning to. . . . Oh, how ridiculous, and dear old Aubrey jealous and trying not to be—trying to think that he wasn't, and she. . . When she thought of herself, she thought of Sledmere.

He looked really worried ; it pained her that he was worried, because he had been so good to marry her. The next moment she became insolently proud inwardly in thought. Good, to marry her ! How ridiculous that would sound to an American man. The thought of America brought to her mind's vision that other man, the love of her girlhood, in the United States. How sad he had looked, Morton Riddell, when he sat opposite her and uttered the words, "I oughtn't to have to lie for you, Susan." She had made men lie; one man had died for love of her, and Sledmere was looking unhappy. What was she, then?

As if they had been uttered again, she seemed to hear the voice of the Cardinal, saying,

"It is a temperament like yours which turns to the spirit of the wanton."

"A wanton!" Her cheeks had tingled when His Eminence had pronounced those words so sternly; now they tingled again while the two men talked on, trying to sit each other out, yet Sledmere quietly satisfied, because he was seated in his own house, conscious that if he only had patience the other must go.

For one instant, a few minutes ago, she had thought that it would be fun to keep Phillip Arbuthnot, to ask him to stay to tea. She knew that, in a sense, it was a triumph, as the triumphs of women go, over the hearts and minds of men, to have him seated here; that all women adored him, that many women loved him, and that he was *difficile*. Now she wanted him to go, she couldn't bear to see the expression on Sledmere's face, the pained, puzzled expression.

She was beginning to read what was passing in her husband's mind, and it showed her that she was making him pass through this ordeal. It was cruel . . . and she was a wanton. She sprang to her feet. She couldn't stand it any more, this absurd conversation between the two men about politics and the vapid topics of the day, racing, polo, shooting, the territorial army. She didn't believe that they could stand it either much longer. Why didn't one of them go, preferably Arbuthnot ?

She was right in what she read as passing through the mind of her husband. He hated the *rôle* he was playing ; this having to stay and watch his wife, protect her from herself. He would have liked to have a wife he could trust.

"Some dear old British frump who would be safe." She smiled to herself at the thought that had she been a British frump, Arbuthnot would not be here. She sprang to her feet, she would have liked to have been alone, to pace up and down, that trick of hers when she was agitated, when the storm mood was on her, pace up and down till the storm died down. But good form demanded that she should make some excuse for this brusque movement. Sledmere took it for a sign that she wanted him to go, and became conscious that now a struggle for supremacy had begun between him and his wife. She could find nothing better to do than to go to the window and lower a blind.

The eyes of both men followed her for an instant, then they resumed their conversation.

"I can't say I agree with you; in fact, you are quite mistaken there."

Susan smiled to herself. Dear old Aubrey was beginning to put side on, to lay down the law; he never did it except with people he disliked. Now, since Sledmere made no signs of leaving, Arbuthnot gave signs of departure. He turned his hat round in his hand and looked at it fixedly for a moment, then he passed his hand over it.

Good God! What a life this woman must lead if Sledmere spent all the afternoon in the drawing-room. How could she stand it?

"Going?" She smiled sweetly at him now that at last he was going.

He felt angered that she did not press him to stay. Sledmere's good humour was returning. He had routed the enemy.

When Arbuthnot had gone, Susan was going to tell him that he had made himself ridiculous and her too. . .

"Oh!"

The butler brought a registered packet. It looked like a small picture, registered and insured. Susan got up to sign the receipt.

"From Rome."

She felt as if she had seen the handwriting before, recognised it without knowing whose it was—a fine, pointed foreign hand, neat and yet nervous, incisive.

"Oh, you must stop and see this. It's Teddie's miniature, I know——"

"From Julian." She addressed her husband.

"Upon my word, it was lucky he did it."

"Oh, my poor Teddie," she sighed. "A dog I was so devoted to, Mr. Arbuthnot, such a perfect dog, wasn't he, Aubrey?"

"I must say I never liked poodles, but he was the cleverest beast I ever saw."

"Oh, not a beast." She was unwinding the parcel from its layers of soft wrappings. "And he's had it framed—how good of. . . . Oh, no . . . it isn't, I've made a mistake."

As Arbuthnot reached the table to look at Teddie's portrait, she hastily threw the wrappings over it.

Her face had grown deadly white.

Now at last, feeling that something unusual had happened, Phillip Arbuthnot took his departure. Her voice was dry and husky as she bid him good-bye.

When he had gone Sledmere turned and looked at her, then walked to the writing-table.

"May I see?"

Her hand lay on the picture.

"Oh, no." She made a gesture to stop him, but the look on his face completed the downfall of her courage—she felt limp and ill.

"Yes, if you like. . . . Oh, it's awful!"

She sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

And Sledmere, with stern features and set lips, unpacked the half-unwrapped picture and took it out. As he did so a little dried bunch of grass and leaves stuck together—by what ?—fell out on to the writing table. It was the portrait of Don Rinaldo, taken after death, lying stiff, immovable, on the bed that had been their bridal bed, with a crucifix on his bosom and dark curtains hung with ducal arms behind it, and at the foot burning candles. A ghastly picture ; and the little dried bunch of grass and leaves were those on which he had been picked up wounded mortally, stuck together by his dried blood.

This was the vengeance of the mother of Rinaldo : the portrait of her dead son and the grass stuck together by his blood !

The swooping depths of remorse and shame ! Susan reached them at that moment, as she held her two hands over her face. And a few minutes ago she had thought of torturing Sledmere, and bidding Phillip Arbuthnot stay.

Sledmere looked at her for a moment doubtfully, wondering whether he should speak to her, try and comfort her or not; wondering, too, whether it was remorse or the revival of dead love which so moved her. Then he gathered up the picture and the box and the dead grass, and carried them away to his study and laid them in a drawer far at the back, and locked them up.

CHAPTER XVI

IT was the solemnity, the awful solemnity, the way it went on, which killed her.

Why did people have faces to suit occasions which yet were out of keeping with the sincerity of the heart ?

If only he wouldn't look like that, so horribly solemn.

It was so like her to say that very evening, (she could not go out anywhere to-night),

" I suppose, Aubrey, that that horrible thing, —I suppose I oughtn't to call it horrid——"

Yes, it was horrid ; the most horrible thing he had ever seen—the picture of his wife's young, dead husband—that was the great mystery to him, the horror to her. Only those who have not lost those they love, can say that they do not hate death—separation, the long uncertain, indefinite one, which our ignorance of the inward soul-thoughts of the other makes it impossible for us to guess at ; their whence, their out or ingoing ; that nothing —no faith to remove mountains, nor courage to face hell, nor unashamed hope, nor subtle philosophy of secret argument—can take away from the bitterness of separation.

Those who really love shrink from the separation of weeks, days, hours, even when they can picture the scene to which the loved one is flitting: then how can it be possible to yield those one loves to the uncertainty of time, of distance, even to God?

To her the great horror lay in the fact that Rinaldo had not been loved, that she had married him to spite her *Magnificenza*, who, outwardly at least, had not been spited at all: to Sledmere the great mystery lay in the wondering whether she had loved him—he was fiercely, desperately jealous of her past to-night, not knowing that the fierceness of the jealousy lay in the fact that he had acted with his eyes open, chosen the baptism of fire, the death of the great hope of her renascence; that was what he dreaded to-night. Yet, looking at her, the adorable loveliness of her softened appealingness hidden beneath the beauty and softness of an exquisite half tea gown, half dinner dress; the whole *soignée*, jewel-twinkling, lace-softness of her; the melting beauty of flesh into clothes; the nobility of the poise of the head; the glory of those russet-gold tresses, kept in place by pins of gold and tortoiseshell, and of which he had seen the unrolled glory, would see it again to-night; the perfect colouring; the grave, sweet mouth; the eyes glorious, upturned, meditative, shy almost, when turned down in thought; the tapering fingers; the chiselled, block-roundness of the throat; the obstinate chin; the shell ears, set close to the head, and the glamour of bewilderment thrown over all, seeming a fillet of charms—all this made up the varied music of the senses which confused him. The loud, threatening, storm music; the rhapsody of speed and loud measure; the galloping of horses; the rush of torrents; the *susurrus* of the wind in the trees; and then—he knew it too well—the cool, smiling, joyous, collected abandonment of the moment, when she laughed at the storm and lay like a child in his arms. And because she cheated him, he cheated himself, and told himself, as the Cardinal had, that she was a precocious child, harmless. So like her it was to say,

"I suppose that that horrid thing has awakened everything and made you feel miserable at having married me."

He came and stood close to her, leaning on the mantelpiece.

The beauty of her bewitched him, and he had to steady himself to see through her beauty, through her bewitchment, to where the sane and the holy and all that he had revered in his childhood beckoned to him.

She was like the thoughts in a dream, supernatural, and he was struggling to reach the sane through her, with her, not without her; to think of anything without her would be unchivalrous.

His wife!

The word meant so much to him, and yet, when he looked at her, he could not reconcile the word with her appearance.

Married to him, she was yet his mistress, the mother of his children; she was yet his Sibyl . . . weird. . . .

So angels must have felt who fell in love with the daughters of the sons of men.

Yet because they were in a London drawing-room, because electric lights of modern days beamed upon them, because outside, the cries and sounds of modern London echoed in their ears—the horn of the motor; the cry of the newspaper boy; the thud, thud of the horse of the hansom cab—he spoke to her in the language of to-day, and she could read through his earnestness the passion with which he invoked her to be normal, trite even, rather than mysterious.

"No, Susan, I can never regret the greatest happiness of my life"—his words thrilled her and made her ashamed—"I can never regret. I thank God every day for you and the children."

She wished somehow that he had not brought the divinity into this. She felt so little divine to-night.

"But . . . Susan, dear," he held out his hand and clasped her uplifted one, "when I think of that poor chap lying there, and of

—his mother . . . I do so wish that I could be sure that you are sorry."

The way he guessed that she was not always sorry, that she still craved for life and excitement, made her silent.

"You don't understand, Aubrey."

She did not speak for a long time after that, because she had to arrange her thoughts.

"I'm not very sorry, but I feel desperate, but—you don't understand—I'm not so sorry for him as I am for you. I—I don't want him between us."

He listened with a keen delight, and her words were like the dropping of cool water to the weary, travel-stained pilgrim. "I wish, oh, I wish that I had met you years ago."

It was his wish that she echoed, and the wish drew them closer.

"I never loved him, never."

Her words were like music, yet his heart went out to the poor dead man.

"I never loved him, yet now—now that he has gone, I wish that I had loved him."

It was all too difficult for him to understand, yet a glimmering of her meaning reached him.

"He seems like one of those flowers one has thrown away, of which one has not seen the colour, really, nor smelled the fragrance. I didn't ever know what his thoughts were—he's such a wasted thing—and all he has left behind is the power to tantalise, to make me wretched, to make me feel sorry for his mother; and then, you know, he comes between us—you and me—with no real reason . . . he was really not part of my life at all. And now I see that even my reason for marrying him was absurd. I don't believe that I ever cared for His Eminence, not really. You are the only one, I believe, that I have ever really cared for."

Her words made his heart beat, then what she said next arrested it with a great thud.

"And the horrible thing is, that because he stands between us, I cannot tell quite whether I love you or not."

Yes, that was just what he felt. Was it possible that now that he was dead, now that she was married to him, she was beginning to love Rinaldo, the memory of him? She had voiced his fear.

They were so closely in unison to-night, united by a great regret, the regret that they had not both met when she would have been single-minded, as he was.

"Oh, how I wish I could be utterly commonplace." She smiled at him a little piteously. "Those that inherit the earth are the frumps, I suppose: there is a similarity in meekness and frumpdom."

He always winced when she misquoted scripture, but he said nothing. That, too, was part of his great renunciation, the way he met her moods, even when they were blasphemous, realising at once his own weakness and the impossibility of meeting her on the common ground of the orthodox.

"You won't be." He spoke sternly. "You won't let things go smoothly."

She laughed inwardly, because she knew that he had Phillip Arbuthnot in his mind.

"You are always playing with fire."

"Yes, I know." She spoke meekly. "I can't help it. It seems to squelch something else, something that would be worse even than fire,—a species of inflammable oil within me that would feed the fires of the whole world."

He groped blindly for some stubborn fact that would impress her.

"I don't see that the past matters. We've buried that . . . we shouldn't have thought of it, but for that tiresome thing to-day; but, Susan, I hate to say it—it shows such a want of faith in you—but I'm so awfully afraid that you're—that you can't live without excitement."

"We've been awfully happy all these years."

She raised eyes with a loving look in them to his.

"Have you, have you really?" A ray of joy filled his eyes.

"Listen, Aubrey. You may not believe me, but these past years have been the happiest of my life. . . . I know—I know that the only life for a woman is the quiet, peaceful, domestic one, and you are a dear."

Once more she held out her beautiful jewelled hand and he clasped it. They clung together. . .

"But——"

He knew that he feared what would come after the "but" as he feared hell.

"But there's something always which makes me love the new. What is it, do you think, Aubrey?"

She raised her eyes to his. She was not quite sincere in this questioning of him, because she knew that she was trying to resist the fateful impulses within her; that she was seeking within, around her, from him, the source of the peace which had been hers for five years, and which she knew was the greatest thing of all, but which some tormenting spirit without would not let her enjoy to the full; as if fate were jealous of some god that wished her well, and would fain bestow gifts upon her of untold immeasurable value, and tried to frustrate him.

"You won't let yourself be just yourself."

"Oh, yes, you are wrong there, Aubrey. It is myself that destroys myself. I can't explain it."

"I wonder"—he spoke musingly, and after many minutes' silence—"I wonder sometimes if you care for me the least little bit."

There was another long silence, which was full of bitterness for him. It wasn't flattering, the way she took time to answer.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Does it seem such an extraordinary thing to ask?"

She gave her merry child laugh, which always conveyed the idea that she saw the joke and enjoyed it hugely.

"No, I suppose that it isn't exactly out of the way; but you know, Aubrey, I often ask myself whether I shall ever know love, real love, the love one reads about, the love that Shakespeare—that all the poets and authors—have described."

"You love the children?"

He put this in doggedly, as if he loathed his jealousy of his own children, and she felt a sense of joy that he knew, saw that she loved her children—his. His words seemed to plead that since he had given them to her, she should include him in her tenderness; yet she still smiled.

"Oh, there's nothing in that; the worst women"—the two last words jarred upon him—"love their children, just the cat-love, the cat and her kittens, don't you know."

Always she would belittle her own virtues, tear her own reputation to shreds before the face of friend and enemy alike.

"But I know that I would be miserable without you."

A gleam of grateful joy shot through his handsome, honest eyes—lake-blue eyes.

This was a wonderful concession on her part.

"And," she went on, "if you only hadn't brought me to this horrible town. . . I told you not to, I've always felt that towns were disastrous to me; I need space and air to work off the steam, and I've always hated the idea of coming to London, ever since I was a child I've been afraid of it. *She* was so unhappy here . . . . everything would be all right, but I suppose the "sea's swift fire" is in my veins and I can't help myself. Towns and people always seem to harm me. I can only imagine that I am very provincial. I suppose it's the American in me. The Americans—oh, wouldn't they hate to hear me say it—are very provincial, you know."

"You're not a bit American, at least not like those I've seen." He had steadily refused once to marry a rich American heiress that had been suggested to him.

"Oh yes, I am an American run amuck, as they do when they get out of the Presbyterian groove, and the old homestead business."

She spoke mockingly, and once more he felt repelled by her flippancy.

"But what I want is to take you about, to show you off, and yet that——"

"You're a perfect dear." His admiration for her thrilled her. "But it's no good, Aubrey

—you'll have to keep me under lock and key."

It was the truth of her words that hurt him. He wanted her to go everywhere, to mingle with his world and hers, and yet to be immoveable. The "ever fixèd mark" was in his mind too, though he had never read the words, and as if she answered his thoughts she uttered suddenly,

"I asked you, you remember, whether you weren't afraid, and you said you'd take your chance."

He smiled at the way she taunted him with his own words.

"Yes, I know."

"So it's no good crying over spilled milk."

"There isn't any spilled milk, but—I know you'll think me a fool, but—I wish you'd do one little thing for me." He hesitated a moment before giving himself away.

"What is it? Of course I will."

"You don't know what it is yet."

"Whatever it is." She spoke with sudden passion, she wanted to please him.

"I wish you wouldn't have that man hanging about so much—he's——"

This time she burst into a rippling peal of laughter.

"Oh dear, what a terrible thing to ask, what an enormous sacrifice to exact! Why, I don't care if I never see him again. I shouldn't care if he was at the bottom of the sea."

She had risen from the low chair on which she sat almost at his feet. Now she laid a hand on his coat sleeve and he drew her towards him.

"You don't know what a load you've lifted off me."

"You are too absurd, and yet, yes, I believe that you understand me better than anyone else." She laid her hand on his shoulder—the peace was returning, the storm had died down. Then looking away from him she said a little unsteadily,

"It was so sweet of you to take that—that photograph away."

He wondered if she had seen the bunch of grasses and leaves; he didn't think so.

"It was just the right thing to do. Oh, how I wish we could lock up the past, put it away for ever—how I wish," she spoke passionately and fervently now, "how I wish there had never been a past."

CHAPTER XVII

LADY Susan was bored, bored to tears. It didn't make any difference to her that her rooms were always full now, and that the papers were full of accounts of her dresses and her jewels and her beauty. She was bored to death.

And the only man who had amused her she had had to show the cold shoulder to, because of Sledmere. Already the impression of horror was passing away, and she was beginning to think Sledmere very foolish, though it was nice to think that he was jealous: no man's love was worth anything that wasn't accompanied by jealousy.

She had had rather a disagreeable half hour with Phillip Arbuthnot, who between speeches in the House, which, as someone had said, confused you with so much brilliancy that you couldn't see if there was anything in them or not, found time to shadow her. In his mind he made notes of the houses at which he might meet her, much in the same way that he made notes for political purposes. The half hour was at the Duchess of Slough's, and she had surprised him by the line she took.

He began by suggesting that if he didn't see her oftener it was because he thought he was doing her a kind turn.

His voice and words reminded her of a ticker she had seen in a broker's office in Wall Street, vomiting forth strips which waved about and heaped themselves up crookedly and wastefully on the floor. They were brittle words which might snap at any moment, and which held little interest unless you caught hold of the one phrase about the one thing that interested you and which you knew about,—and she hadn't. She became distinctively Sledmere's wife in the face of his patronage.

"So good of you to want to come, but I'm always so busy."

She hated the smile on his face when she said this.

He could see through her—he had learned a lot about the widowed Duchessa d'Ostia, and he thought that she was playing a part.

That was the way the past haunted her all through the London season. There was veiled insolence in the attitude of so many that she met.

One woman she hated because she, Susan, had spoken to her of her children, as she always spoke, enthusiastically, betraying how she loved them, and the woman had answered,

"You're not going to tell me that you really care for children?"

"Not other people's children, but mine are rather nice," she had answered lightly, while within something boiled and surged. Why, because she had once sown wild oats, should these women taunt her?

What about men? Didn't they love here and there and even often have illegitimate children, and yet love those that were born them of their wives?

Her whole being hurled itself against the injustice, the humbug of life.

She was growing gradually to understand that the whole effort of the orthodox is to down those who do not follow the bee line of hypocrisy. A deadly feud existed in her against all those who dared to pit their respectability against her charm.

And while ever the wisdom in her dictated that the one thing for her to do was to appear respectable, orthodox, even dowdy,—oh, the power of dowdiness—something that was above them all, beyond them, whispered that if she would only be herself and callous she could down them all.

And those she felt the deepest scorn for, those whom she supposed existed everywhere, and who reminded her of the Contessa Figi, while she wondered whether everywhere they existed, were the social-religious.

She remembered that her mother had spoken to her of a dear, good woman, one of those women who are like sweet-scented flowers, who even in their dying leave a fragrance and a perfume behind them, married to a stingy viscount who spoke of her as his first and only love, and yet who denied her all that her soul most craved for, which was charity, to dole out charity to the sick and suffering and who did her kindly acts like Saint Elisabeth, with a lie on her lips.

She had often laughed when her mother had told her about her.

"She was one of those women who make one believe in religion, in all that is best. They had prayer-meetings in the drawing-room, and then the next minute they rushed down to the hall to receive the Prince of Wales, and gave smart parties in London to which they invited all the larky ladies and all the fast men. They said, or rather he said, that he didn't believe that what everyone said was true—that it was wrong to judge. And one day she came and sat with me and held my hand tight and said,

"'We're really the most awful hypocrites. We talk as if Christ was an intimate friend, and yet——Oh, Bianca, I'm so dreadfully afraid of God's wrath! When I read the Sermon on the Mount and compare it with our lives, it frightens me.'"

And Susan had met the daughter, who carried out the traditions of the house and gave smart dances for her daughter; and she had been bidden to the second marriage of the old viscount to a rich woman; and while she had not gone to it, she yet had wondered how the rich viscount would feel when he met his first, his only love, in Heaven.

Naturally, the Bible did say that there was no marriage or giving in marriage in heaven, but then that didn't seem any encouragement to second marriages; only she fancied that the first wife might ask him, "How's that?"

And she had listened whilst the daughter told her: "Of course, when one thinks of dear mother, it seems awful, but our poor father was so lonely, we feel sure that she would have wished it;" and the same daughter had sent her tickets for a lecture of the Rev. Eglington Smith, with the heading: "Shall we know our dear ones in Heaven?"

Certainly Susan thought the British mind wonderful; it was all part of the same strange self argument which made her father and brother so delightful to her now that she did not need them. They both came often to see her, and she had seen at last the beautiful home where she and her mother, Bianca, ought to have spent their lives, under the protection of Vermoyle.

She looked upon it with the eyes of a stranger —she and Sledmere were there as guests, and there were no child memories surrounding it, only other awful memories were evoked—and while she wondered how it would have been with them, with her mother and her, if they had lived there—the utterance of her mind was,

"We couldn't have stood it, she and I; it would have killed us."

Yet she grieved a little over the want of memories, of little tender incidents that would have made it dear, just as she grieved for her children when she was away from them, grieved for those five peaceful years she had spent with her husband, when she was in crowded drawing-rooms with strains of neurotic music reaching her ears. . . . Yet for all that Phillip Arbuthnot saw through her, he did not see everything. He saw only the love of the storm, without knowing how she had also enjoyed the peace of the lull, how she was striving to love it again, to find it. The flesh cried to the flesh, but he had no fitting spirit to meet hers. Always it would be so, those who admired her would try and drag her back, while the soul within was facing the raging battle none knew of but herself.

It was the end of the conversation that had angered her when, as she got up from her seat; he asked her as if he had a right to,

"Am I never going to see you alone again?"

The lowering of the eyelids simultaneously with the raising of her head denoted anger. Even he could feel it, but he was not prepared for the way she threw the words at him.

"Why should you wish to see me alone?"

He ventured too far, this man who only amused her, and whom she had told Sledmere she would not mind seeing at the bottom of the sea. All that made her cling even feebly to him was the sense of triumph of conquest, because he was one of society's favourites. With mock courtesy, yet with a gesture which reminded one of courtiers of old days, he bowed, then turned away.

She had given him his dismissal, and he had taken it.

And Susan passed quickly through the room with a feeling of regret.

It was all very well to say to herself that she had done what was right, kept her promise to Sledmere—doing right meant casting out of your life all the pleasant people. That was why she thought it so foolish of any but the fast to gather in London. How was it possible to go on meeting the same people day after day and not to become interested in them? Not to want to go further in inquiries after their minds, their pursuits, their interests? Yet always, between men and women, the unfolding meant really, at last, the reaching of the one common interest which must remain unanswered, or end in disastrous understanding.

It might not be so with all, but with women like herself it could not be otherwise. She was not colourless enough to have innocuous friendships.

And crossing the room alone, while many eyes turned upon her, she met Sledmere looking for her, anxious.

"The last time I saw her she was sitting with Mr. Arbuthnot," some woman had said to him with an evil smile, and he had hastened to find her.

The great restlessness of doubt had invaded his being again.

"Oh, Aubrey, I'm so glad to find you. I want to go home."

In her voice was something of the fretful tone of a weary child.

And in the carriage she lay back wearily with closed eyes.

Why was life so hideously boring? Why was one given this intense vitality, this *besoin de vivre* merely that it should be repulsed on every side? Movement, that was what she needed, perpetual movement. Even the movement of the carriage soothed her, only it annoyed her, jarred, when it was impeded in its course by other carriages. Something had to happen, must, she told herself, or she would go mad—and yet all the time at the back of her brain the past was making living pictures which frightened her, and within something craved for peace.

How angry she would have been if she had known what Phillip Arbuthnot thought of her; that he didn't believe in her virtue, that he thought of her as a "humbug."

"She's going to hold on to her present position for all it's worth," he said to himself, disbelieving in her, disappointed, yet admiring her business acumen, her wisdom.

How strange it is that no humans understand the phases their fellow-humans pass through, and that men never believe in the reformation of women—never. The woman who has once been weak must be weak to the end, and yet men spend the last half of their lives in renouncing the first half; only women must end as they set out, and are expected at seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, to be as they always will—to know if they love the man they marry, and having married them, must love them to the end.

And, as if this were an unlucky, or at least a disagreeable day in her life's calendar, when she went to her room, Joséphine told her in awe-struck accents of the woman who had called.

Joséphine had seen her face, knew her again though she would not give her name, though Joséphine could not recall it.

It was the woman she had seen that night when she, Joséphine, had gone to see Lori instead of "Miladi."

"*Elle reviendra demain,*" Joséphine repeated.

She, Joséphine, had told her not to—tried to get her to leave her address, but she would not.

It was like Susan to answer haughtily,

"Why shouldn't she come? Perhaps she needs help."

The butler had handed her the parcel containing the miniature, and there was a letter from Julian Vandegger. The portrait of Teddie was on her table; how wonderful it was, how lifelike!

He seemed to stand out amongst her friends the most faithful, the only true, unexacting one, and he was dead.

He was like Sledmere—she had said that once to Sledmere and he had appreciated the compliment.

"You and Teddie are so much alike, you don't notice all the silliness, but just love on."

But now his portrait and the fact that Faustina had come to London, come to the house, reminded her of everything.

All the voices of Rome were buzzing in her ears again to-night.

Long after Joséphine had left her she sat on in her room, musing, with her eyes fixed on Teddie's portrait, the dear black thing with its ridiculous form and its true eager eyes, a thinking dog-clown who did tricks and agreed to look ridiculous, yet who loved so unswervingly.

How it brought it all back to her! She could see them all, the Contessa Figi, Rinaldo, all of them arraigned themselves in front of her, and her *Magnificenza* towered above them all in his imperiousness—half human, half statue, but—oh, no, not at all divine, not clerical, though he thought he was; merely a man of the world protecting himself from the world's tumult behind the spiked iron bars of the Church of Rome. She didn't wonder that everyone acquiesced with regard to some controlling power, for when reason ran riot it wounded itself against blank walls. One's mind ran on and on, hurling through spaces, then it had to come back again, and more cautiously, behaving like everyone else. Everyone was in a cage, imprisoned, with minds soaring beyond the bars; the happy ones, the lucky ones kept their minds behind bars too. Each one had to return to the normal, the orthodox, the puny, to the trivial task, to the daily, hourly, tiring struggle. Magnificence of aim, sweeping ambitions, all these were mocked at by the gods, derided. To love one man to the end, to have children, to die, that was all of a woman's fate, repeated over and over again. She had no fear of Faustina. She came to frighten her, she felt that instinctively. Lori had deserted her probably, and she came for help . . . and now she would threaten to tell Sledmere about Lori.

She, Faustina, didn't know that Sledmere had heard everything from her own lips, from Susan's.

Susan laughed once to herself as she thought how surprised she would be when she took her to Sledmere. She was going to do that.

Then something within her recoiled before this act. He would behave as a gentleman, as he always did; but how he would loathe this echo of the past, of corrupt Rome ringing out in his London drawing-room—how hard it was upon him.

Was she, Susan Roach, worth it all? She stood for an instant in front of the tall glass in her room and looked at herself.

She was beautiful, yes, with a peculiar magnetic beauty which detached her from other women but——

She seized a candle and went nearer to the glass, holding it in front of her. She looked into her own eyes; they seemed inscrutable and wonderful, and yet horrible, like mysterious jewels which had existed before all time and held secrets of bygone ages.

Had Eve had eyes like hers?

Yet after all, what was the fascination of the body for man?

Her flowing dressing-gown reminded her of a fashion-plate.

"Just a woman," she mused to herself, "a woman, a case of emotions, and yet men slave for her, worship her, go mad with love for her, and she——"

She laughed to herself as she replaced the candle.

"Well, she's decidedly troublesome."

Sledmere came to her now and she told him about Faustina.

"Oh, don't look like that, don't trouble about it, it's just part of everything. I told you that you would be constantly bothered about me if you married me."

And he, intoxicated by her beauty, answered her,

"And I said I'd take my chance. Well, it's been worth it."

The voices of Rome hushed that night. Sledmere loved her. The great peace had returned.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was after Faustina had been and gone with the reminder from Sledmere that if she ever showed her face again, she would be arrested, that Sledmere began to wonder if he had done wisely in trying this experiment—for it was an experiment, after all—of taking her out into the world. He didn't care for society, never had, as a matter of fact, and had yielded partly to suggestions of his relations, the managing elder sister and even his dear old mother, that it was a shame to bury her in the country, and that it would not suit her temperament for long.

What he desired most passionately, for his children's sake, was that she should pass through society unassailed by gossip, that the world in time should learn to look upon the tale of Rome as he did, as a mysterious tale woven around childish naughtiness.

He remembered that his mother had dismissed a ghoulish nurse once, because she insisted that the outbursts of temper of one of his little brothers was a possession of the evil one.

For himself. . . . He was not aware that for himself he desired the test—the test of whether she loved him really—to know whether she had really done with the storm. It was a dangerous experiment, yet better a mare's nest than a fool's paradise, and if it was only because she was far from everyone that she was so quiet, better to know. . . Yet he lived in dread of the knowledge, not aware that he was always weighing within himself the proportions between the way she appealed to his senses, his delight in her, or his desire that she should be like others, like the women he had always thought he would marry. Sometimes he asked himself, half affrighted, whether she knew the way she fascinated him. If she did know, she was quite capable of torturing him with tests of her own.

It had been arranged between them that he, not she, should see the woman. Faustina's horror, the picture of it when she came face to face with Sledmere, filled her imagination with amusement.

"How I would love to see her face when she is shown in to him!"

The next moment she regretted that she had not insisted on seeing her herself. What might she not say?

Yet she had been wise in giving in to Sledmere's wish that she should not go near the woman; doubly wise, because he would have imagined that there were secrets still to be revealed which she dreaded for him to know, and she was entirely sincere with Sledmere, had told him everything, painting everything with her mental, realistic brush which was ghoulish in its rendering of horrible detail—doubly wise because to see Faustina again, would be to awaken a thousand devils.

Yet the fact that Faustina sat there brought a faint echo of the storm—as she sat in her room and pictured Sledmere and Faustina together in the library. All the past came up again, all the panorama of those wonderful days when she thought she loved the Cardinal and yet sowed her wild oats here and there—a woman's wild oats—how terrible the crop of them, notwithstanding their spareness as compared to those of men, sown thickly in the hot-beds of passion, yet the harvest of which is scattered to the four winds. Faustina's horror. She laughed to herself when she thought of dear old Prym's face when she had jumped into the carriage beside her; she remembered her words,

"For heaven's sake tell him to drive on quickly."

Then she remembered the lie she had told.

How often she had lied in those days; only to Sledmere she had never lied.

Dear old Aubrey—struggling with Faustina in the drawing-room.

She could imagine how shocked even the groom of the chambers must have been when he had to usher her in to Sledmere's presence.

"He probably thinks that she is an old flame of Aubrey's. Poor old Aubrey! He probably imagines that she is the remains of Aubrey's wild days—and she's the remains of mine. Oh, poor Aubrey, what a shame——"

"I wonder what she'll tell him, what she'll invent."

She laughed softly to herself.

There wasn't much to fear. When Faustina saw Sledmere she would be flabbergasted, and he couldn't speak a word of Italian. How on earth were they going to get on?

"How I would love to hear them."

But her mood changed presently.

The door opened and Sledmere came in. His face wore that ash-grey look which with him denoted always strong emotion or harassment.

"She wants me to give her money. What do you think?"

His voice sounded so different—conveyed such a different impression to the expression on his face; the voice was so resigned, so patient, that it arrested her attention.

"She is in trouble, I suppose."

"She says so, of course, but if we give it, it will look as if——" he broke off.

"By God, it's a hateful business!"

The swift colour rose to her cheeks and he could see the sensitive quivering of her whole face. He was sorry that he had said anything, but he loathed the whole business. He couldn't understand half the woman said, and what a woman to be in his, Sledmere's, sitting-room! It emphasised a past of Susan's he had only thought about as an impossible dream.

"I'm—I'm dreadfully sorry——"

The shame on her face hurt him.

"Oh well, you can't help it, little woman."

With a dry, trembling voice Susan asked, "What does she say, what does she want?"

"Oh, well, you know, all the story, trying to make out all sorts of things, but I can't understand half she says."

"Poor old Aubrey." Susan murmured this across Sledmere's words.

"She wants money of course, but the point is——" neither mentioned the word that hung between them suspended.

"I'm afraid that if we once begin——"

"Do you think it's safe to leave her so long downstairs alone? She might take something."

"Do you really think——" Sledmere got up from his seat.

Was it possible that the woman was as bad as this?

It brought all the sordid, gruesome things of life so close to him, and he hated to feel that she, Susan, his wife, the mother of his children, was mixed up in it. Yet he was battling with himself, reminding himself that he had said that he would take the chance, and that this was part of the chance . . . reminding himself of last night when she had been at once so adorable and yielding.

" Well, I'll tell her that we'll send something through Pendleson ; it wouldn't do to give her nothing. There's no hurry——" He broke off again.

Once more the terrible thought hovered between them.

" She was a bit surprised when she saw me," he went on more brightly.

" Oh, Aubrey, I'm so sorry."

Across the table at which she was sitting she stretched out her arm and tried to reach his hand. He made no movement to clasp hers.

He hated the whole business.

She drew hers back, disappointed.

" I think that's the best thing to do."

He stood a moment in the doorway with his hand on the knob.

" Yes, I suppose so."

Her voice sounded despairing.

He hesitated a moment longer. He wanted to tell her that she mustn't mind, but he hated the whole business so cordially that he was irritated with her.

When the door closed, Susan leaned forward on the table, one arm outstretched across it.

"How he hates this," she whispered to herself. "How is it that he doesn't hate me?"

For the first time the whole shame of it came over her. The realisation of how a man like him, belonging to a family like his, would hate it all, loathe it. It was not fair that a woman's wild oats should lead to so bitter a reaping, so sickening a one.

She loved the way he took it—it softened her, abased her. He was such a gentleman . . . and she—naturally people would say that ladies didn't do such things. She laughed mischievously to herself.

"That's why they're so inexpressibly bored, the poor dears. To be a lady doesn't always mean to be a woman, not a real one."

Poor Aubrey!

She thought of his words on the preceding night, "It's worth it."

"I wonder if he feels like that to-day."

If he did, then even she thought him wonderful. The passionate desire to have had no past seized her again, made her feel ill . . . she got up and paced the room. Once she stood still and stretched her arms above her head, half clenching her fist.

"I can't stand it," she said aloud. Now she heard voices, and Sledmere came in, holding their three-year-old son by the hand.

"Look at this young fellow. I met him

on the stairs, and he refused to go up to the nursery."

The thought flashed through Susan's mind that he brought him so that they should have no talk, no discussion about what had happened, and she wanted to know everything. She was always at her best with her children, but to-day she felt shy of her little son. embarrassed with both of them.

She drew the child on to her knee and hid her face a little behind his curls, drawing off his coat and fidgeting with his clothes.

She and the child made a lovely picture, and her shame made her soft, almost meek for the moment, making her even for the instant, gentle, submissive, domestic, like any other woman. Sledmere came behind them and clasped them both, his arms encircling mother and child, and very shyly she looked up into his face.

It was, she told herself, the most glorious moment of her life, when he showed the continuance of his love, even after the horrible interview he had just had below, an interview which to him of all men was specially galling, specially repulsive.

"You have forgiven me?" she almost whispered.

"I'm so awfully sorry for you." He spoke brightly. Now that his arms were encircling her and the child, all the gloom was beginning to dispel. "But it's all over now."

He stooped and kissed her, comforting her for what he imagined must be the most horrible hour of her life, since it had so affected him. He did not know that to the children of adventure terrible things are but part of the great tragedy in which they themselves are acting the most heart-rending scenes of all, and that carried away by their part they do not realise that it is all counterfeit of life, and that the really moving scenes of life lie in small things, in the small every-day sincerities which pierce and permeate simple existences.

Even Susan was beginning to dimly perceive this, realised it for a moment as her husband's arms hugged her and the child,—his whole world, hers, the child's, within his arms.

"Yes, it's over, thank Heaven."

She could not keep back that other question of her brain.

Would it ever be over really while she lived? Was not the storm her boon companion. Would it not always boom and roar around her, tearing her this way and that, envelop her, confuse her, forbid her peace and calm.

But he, Sledmere, felt no doubt of its being over. He had closed the last chapter himself. He had been kind because he imagined that only a great trouble had made this woman come all this way to terrify Susan into giving her money.

He had taken her address and he had instructed his lawyers to send her a sum of money. If ever he heard that she mentioned his wife's name again, if ever she returned, he would take other measures, hand her over to the police. She was not even to have speech with his solicitors. Thus he protected the name of his wife.

And the understanding of him was growing within her. It was but a tiny glow, like that of a dying ember in a neglected stove. It might turn to cold grey ash—it might burst suddenly into a living flame. Which would it do ? Unconsciously she was asking herself this : would it live, would it die ? How fierce was the power of the storm—how great the stress and splendour of the roaring gale. Would it fascinate her—lure her—would she stretch out her arms to it, become part of it, mate with the storm ? Or would it run away, the storm, crouch away, cower away, sullen, brooding, recalcitrant, but distant, where she could not reach it ? Would the thrilling adventure of life leave her alone henceforward ? Did she want it to leave her alone ?

She thought that she did, as Sledmere hoisted the boy on to his shoulder to carry him upstairs, keeping him there, with one strong hand clutching the child's knees over his white embroidered frock, with the other holding a tiny, fat hand over his head.

"Kiss mother." The giant form with its tiny, white burden stooped so that the child's face could reach his mother's. Thus they did homage to her, the woman—the head of the house that was, and the head of the house that should be. Thus they bowed before her in love and respect, because she was wife and mother and beautiful, and she——?

Why did the Cardinal's words sound like a bugle call from afar reminding.

"The spirit of the wanton."

"Ah, no." She wanted to be healthy and strong—healthy-minded, superb. She wanted to rise to the heights of Sledmere's ideals, to range herself beneath his standard, while something whispered insidiously that she could go further still than he . . . that the secrets of great things were hers.

Her eyes followed them both lovingly as they passed through the doorway, Sledmere's tall figure having to bend a little, lest the child's head should strike the lintel above . . . followed them proudly, fondly, yet with a sense of aloofness. They belonged to something different, to a world of thought, to a nook of the world, which she had once despised, which still seemed to her colourless, one given over to small methods and petty joys, yet which she knew was the only one that suited the world, the only one where cool breezes lurk and nestle, and where birds sing, sheltered from the frosts of winter and from the glaring heat of day—and where peace is.

The great peace. Did she crave for it, or did she repudiate it in her heart? Was hers the spirit of the wanton that must one day depart from them?

Why, why had he said this, her *Magnificenza?*

The words tainted her life. By suggestion he had aroused that spirit. How un-Christlike were the priests in their fear of sin. They were not disciples of Christ, but fierce door-keepers defending the strongholds of uniform, hypocritical self-righteousness. Why, when he had said "Go!" had he not added "Thy sins be forgiven thee, go and sin no more."

When she thought of him, she laughed softly to herself.

"He was afraid."

Yet all that day and for many days Sledmere was happy. He had loathed the interview, but it was the last knocking at the door of his wife's past—now they were going to be happy. He had seen how she felt it, felt for her, her humiliation. He was glad that he had borne the burden for her—he fancied that he saw more than he had really seen—she was abased, but not broken. The spirit within her defied man and God and was sundered. Part was given to the devil, part seemed to be sublime, but sublimity now held something magnificent and stirring in it to balance the stress and glory of the storm. She couldn't have a colourless, commonplace sublimity; and repose, inaction, good form, respectability seemed to her colourless and commonplace. Why didn't the glory of God fill her being with the roar of storm as adventure did?

And it was like her to probe and analyse, to inquire of what the electric currents were made which composed the storm that had passed over her head, instead of thanking the gods for its passing, on the altar of silence. When she was alone with him that night she asked him,

"Don't you hate me for to-day?"

And his answer—"No, dear one, because the last cloud between us has rolled by," irritated her.

Why should he take it for granted that she was penitent, remorseful?

She, Susan Roach of the many surnames, refused to be like other women—repudiated peace, anyhow the cheaply-won peace of her husband's complacency. If she won peace she would wrench it, the white flag of truce with the gods, from some hill-peak strewn with the corpses in which disillusioned souls had dwelt.

Then suddenly the loyalty, the goodness of him, his patience, seized her as if by the throat. With all his limitations he had gone to the furthermost line of his tether for her—something seemed to break within her, then melting, she threw herself against him, laid her head on his breast and her beautiful arms clung to his neck.

"Oh, Aubrey, I'm so sorry, I would have spared you this . . ." she was sobbing now . . . "I do love you so."

As he held her to him, and caressed her lovely head, Sledmere told himself that he had been right to take the chance—that all was worth it.

CHAPTER XIX

"AUBREY! I've got to dance—I can't help myself . . . I must."

In moments of great excitement Susan became offensively American. Once he had hated this, now it amused him, pleased him. She was so absolutely herself when she was blatantly American, and he loved to think that however much she aped being American, she was born an English woman. He and Vermoyle and Strand got on capitally. They were of the same race, of the same "paste," and their individuality, the tiny hair-breadths of difference, the sprays, light sprays of sifted waters which their different spirits threw into the air, didn't count.

"That's an American waltz I've danced to in New York, in Washington, at the hot springs. I've got to dance. Do you mind, Aubrey?"

"Mind? Why should I mind?"

"I suppose it's awfully undignified."

"What nonsense! Why shouldn't you dance?" Aubrey was feeling very happy, very genial, very normal. This was his sister's house, a lovely place on the river, where, although she and her husband had a house in London, they had elected to have a ball.

Everything concerning his own family always had a soothing effect upon him. Even the severities of his eldest sister, who was annoyed with him for not having married Lady Rose Lathom, gave a comfortable feeling of stability and method and self-control. Her voice, her words, sounded like a school-bell, reminding one on the playground that there were other things in life than football. His wife Susan was like a secret bower in the perfumed garden of his life, and to which he stole alone when thought was allowed its free will, to which he stole almost guiltily at times. He had crept almost guiltily this evening to her side for a second or two. She was looking exceptionally lovely to-night, and with that instinct to aid the successful which is a peculiarity of relations, because she was much admired, her sister-in-law, the family, had been very nice to her. The ball-room was a charming one, and the fresh country air had already done its revivifying work and given a freshness to her colour which added to her beauty. It was a charming idea, this giving a ball away from London during the season, and prevented over-crowding. She and Sledmere and a few others were staying the night here. The occasion was the engagement of Sledmere's niece, his eldest sister's child, the sister who was fifteen years older than he was, and whose house this was. *Livsglad* was awake in Susan to-night, not hysteria, not the fatal storm-passion, just youth and sane excitement and the sense of *bien-être.* The knowledge was there of being the most remarkable woman in the room, and perhaps in a sense the most beautiful, but she had no desire to make neurotic conquests of this one or that. She felt instinctively that to-night she had conquered them all. There was pure joy in her expression as she turned to Sledmere and almost laughed at him the words,

"Aubrey, I've got to dance . . . I can't help myself. . . I must."

And he caught fire at the flame of her radiance, and literally beamed at her.

"What nonsense, why shouldn't you ?"

"Well, dance with me then."

To-night her gaiety included himself. The old rag-time waltz, of what a lot of things it reminded her, without saddening her! Even if she had not been as she really was, fond of him, she would have whirled round with any man to that tune. She had never danced since she married Rinaldo. Now to-night all was forgotten, and he, Sledmere, did not want to remind her. He felt instinctively that this was one of her good moments, one to be cultivated, but a wonderful shyness came over him at the thought of dancing with her. He had never been a dancing man. He laughed awkwardly, yet full of good temper.

"I don't know the steps they use now; you wouldn't enjoy it, I assure you, but——" he looked round the room for a second as if seeking someone to introduce to her whom he himself thought worthy. Sledmere was standing on her right. At her left now stood Phillip Arbuthnot, asking her to dance. "I'll go over and get——"

Before he had finished speaking, Susan was dancing with Phillip.

All the joy of the evening had vanished for him, yet as she yielded to Arbuthnot's invitation, there had been no other thought in her mind than that of dancing before the old familiar tune had died away. She barely realised that this was Phillip Arbuthnot, the man who had shown that he loved her—anyhow, what did it matter for a dance? She had forgotten them all, the Cardinal, Rinaldo, Lori, Rome . . . even those who moved around her to the same measure. She was a girl again in that girl-paradise, America, where joy has been caught up by youth, caught, cornered, made into a trust of innocent youth, and where a "good time" means more than religion. She didn't even think of Arbuthnot individually, only as of one of many "beings" who had danced with her to this same tune; and Sledmere, though he pretended not to, even to himself, watched her. She had been considered a wonderful dancer in America; to-night those who were not dancing stood and watched. It was not only the poetry of motion, but it was something that inspired mystic thoughts to see her dance. Sledmere hated to see it, yet followed her with admiration. His heart was thumping. It was his own fault that he had not danced with her. He felt again the vague discomfort which was not quite regret, which he always associated with his marriage.

Once he felt so fiercely jealous that he almost went up to her to tell her to stop, that she would tire herself.

Once the thought outlined itself: how could she, with that photograph lying locked in his drawer?—and their thoughts synchronising without knowing it, the thoughts of Phillip Arbuthnot with those of Sledmere, he, Phillip, whispered,

"Would you like to stop?"

He had not meant her to dance, though he, a beautiful dancer, had been caught, enmeshed by the idyllic way she danced. He had meant to draw her away to some distant corner—the woman he didn't believe in, yet who had aroused his passion, the woman he had heard so much of, and even if she were extraordinary, had the right to be, seeing how fair, how rare she was.

Peacocks, apes, sandalwood, frankincense and myrrh, gold,—what Solomon of the present day would not gladly have laid these at the feet of this twentieth century queen of Sheba!

"No, no, not till the music stops," was Lady Susan's answer. She was a little breathless, for she had not danced for nearly six years, but the intoxication of movement was hers. It was as if with each step she regained the years she had lost—the years while she had been busy sowing her wild oats and reaping them, then of late trying to scatter them to the four winds.

They stopped with the last note of music, after it, as a matter of fact—they had made half a turn without music.

For a second or two she stood there by his side breathless, her brain whirling under the spell of the joy it had been. How she had loved it—she had forgotten the man by her side, forgotten that once she had been the Duchessa d'Ostia, that now she was Lady Sledmere. She had been a girl again—wandered back to the dear old days, to the dear old summer time.

Now she awoke bewildered.

The man beside her wished to take her somewhere to sit down to rest, to rest at least from dancing, in order that he might weary her with his platitudes, for the repetition of the counterfeit of love is the baldest of platitudes—a man who does not really love a woman sincerely, deeply, chivalrously, passionately, might as well take out one of those strange little books containing the recipes of etiquette and read it to her. Are there any books on the etiquette of love-making ? It might be well to write one, and the first recipe should be—" How not to make a hash of life "—with the addition, " Beware of over-seasoning."

She, Susan, was not aware that the man who stood there, Phillip Arbuthnot, resembling a curate in the way that he was a darling with gods and women, and the *bête noir* of men, was both disappointed and bewildered.

This joyous, girlish, innocent-looking woman, what had she to do with the mysterious woman with a past of whom he had heard so much, of whom in a way he expected so much ? Was she acting, posing as an *ingénue* ? What then was the tale he had been told of an obsession for a Cardinal, and the death of a young husband, killed defending her name from a quondam lover ?

Oh, what fools, what fools the humans are to expect a sequence of temperament as they turn up a sequence of trumps. When will men and women understand the old, worn-out adage that to err is human, and that the most human err the most, and that while one errs one way, the other errs another, and that because a woman or a man has once been foolish, he or she yet may become wiser than they are, just as he or she who starts out soberly, cautiously, gingerly, may yet one day outstrip the fool in his folly and convulse the world with crime.

But there is a type of man which looks upon an unconventional woman as his prey.

As she wandered out into the conservatory on Phillip's arm, Sledmere caught sight of her, and something surged to his brain which blinded him and made him see little dots of red everywhere. He had a wild impulse to follow her. The next moment he took himself to task—what else could she have done after dancing with him ? She was not a timid young girl to go back to her mother in early Victorian fashion when the dance was ended, and . . . if he did not trust her, what right had he to call her wife—the mother of his children ? That meant so much to Sledmere, and one thing else. The woman who needed protection—who had no one to stand by her, who even to-day as his wife he felt it without acknowledging it, was looked at a little askance, or if not askance at least mistrustfully, by his world, because she did not exactly resemble it, because she had something foreign about her. Oh, how hidebound is the small island that yet rules over scores of races, and herds in almost every nationality into the uniform, unyielding, strait waistcoat of British empire ! He himself was, without knowing it, broadening. To-night her mocking voice seemed to ring in his ears, "English, dear old Aubrey; therefore it must be right."

He still thanked God that he was English, with the Anglo-Pharisee thanksgiving for not being as other men, but he was beginning to see at least this, that other nations did still exist, and call themselves rightfully or wrongfully "nations." Whenever he thought of Susan, he never could help the portrait rising in his mind of a little Frenchman he had met, who had won a race in England. The two presentments seemed indivisible.

Yet he was disturbed and worried while Susan sat in the conservatory, her excitement beginning to die down, while it slowly dawned upon her that this was the man Sledmere was jealous of, and whom she had in a sense dismissed. He was silent so long in the corner of the conservatory that he had taken her to, that she turned and looked at him.

"I'm afraid I've tired you out."

There was the faintest suspicion, not of American twang, but of the scornfully inquiring tone in which Americans so often speak. There was a species of conditional mood in her words which gave the impression that she had said, "I guess" or "I reckon." The unuttered cynicism stung him, though the voice was so low and melodious—Irishly musical, Britishly good-form.

"Oh no, it would take more than that to

tire me; one so rarely gets hold of a good dancer that I don't know when I enjoyed a dance so much, only please don't be annoyed with me if I say this."

"I probably shall," Lady Susan interposed demurely.

"Well, I'll be dreadfully sorry, but I must say it."

She noticed for the first time that he was very good-looking. He gave the impression of a strong character, masquerading in evening dress.

"He has a look of Morton," she said to herself, and to-night her mind was wandering across the water, and everything that reminded her of the United States pleased and pained her at the same time. Elated as she had been for a short space while she danced, now she was homesick, not for Rome, but for the place where she had been a girl, where she and her mother had lived before all the tragedy stepped in.

"Oh, well, if you've got to."

He looked at her curiously for a moment. Was she laughing at him, or daring him to tell her what he felt, and thought, and that she filled his mind, had filled it for weeks past, ever since he met her?

"Do you know that I can't make you out, I mean your love of dancing . . . Well, it's so unlike you."

"How can you know what's like me or unlike me? Why shouldn't I dance?"

The tone was the one in which she had said to Vandegger, "What, of you and me?" The same tone, the same voice which had placed him without the pale, made him her friend, but forbidden him for ever to approach her as a lover, made it impossible.

And Phillip Arbuthnot, though a connoisseur in women, shrank a little before her words.

"Oh, no reason at all. You dance so beautifully, that I imagine that it is a great pleasure to you, a sensation; I imagine that you must skate beautifully."

"Of course all American women skate."

Then both side-tracked.

"I didn't know you were American."

"Oh, well, only half and half." She laughed, and he thought the way she laughed and ended as if she were hushing it, the prettiest thing he had ever heard. He did not know that the fact that she claimed to be American altered his mood and laid a cloak of Saxon upon her beneath which mystery died.

"That explains so much to me."

"Really?" The tone implied that she was glad he was getting at it.

"Well, no American I have ever seen has been exactly like you."

"Well, I'm thankful for that."

She fanned herself leisurely.

" You look so disgustingly happy to-night."

She turned and stared at him, and once more he quailed.

" Well, why shouldn't I be ? "

" Oh, no reason at all, except that so few women are, or if they are they won't own to it."

" Don't you wish me to be happy ? "

Once more the ascending, scornful American tone.

" Yes, of course I do, but it's—it's so unlike what—what I thought you were."

" I'm sorry."

The tone suggested that she'd try to be unhappy if he wished it.

" I'm very glad."

" Are you ? You don't look it," was Susan's inward comment.

Then the gladness died, and the past, with the image of the photograph of Rinaldo and the infamy of Lori, the visit of Faustina, the scorn of the Cardinal, the hate of his mother, the jealousy of the Contessa Figi, the friendship of Vandegger, the pitying spinster-motherliness of old Prym, the regret for her mother—which somehow in a way was mixed up with her regret for Teddie's death, because her mother's hand had lain upon his black, shaved back—the devotion of Adolphe and Joséphine, which was part and parcel of Sledmere's loyalty which seemed to-night so touching, though he would not dance,—all this mingled with a strange, strong, physical yearning for her children, for a knowledge of whether the nurse was at her post, of whether they were sleeping, the thought of the children bringing with it always the poignant remorse that she, the mother of these new Carys of this generation, was not as the other mothers of Carys had been, with untainted pasts. All this made the look in her eyes wonderful as she turned upon him. Only the French word *cerné* can describe the look in her eyes, half of ferocity, half of deepest remorse as she uttered the words,

"If you had suffered one eighth of what I have suffered, you wouldn't grudge me one hour or two of happiness."

The old Susan had awakened, and time and experience and many thoughts had changed her mood into thunderbolts. The storm raged without or within, who shall say?

With a movement of infinite grace, yet full of the strength and vitality of a young tiger, she sprang from her seat, and because she and Nature held that link between them which so especially, though not exclusively, belongs to the new world, which has not yet wholly detached itself from the soil, not wholly sprung away from the tenderness of young things, of emerging witchery of greenness, she passed out into the cool, mysterious garden, her satin shoes seeming to strike upon the soft lawns some note of music, the music of the violets, to press downwards beneath the moonlit, moss-like, yielding earth, some hidden pedal that set ringing the soft, appealing melody of the world.

The lights from the windows lit up here and there a leaf and made its dull glow the echoing of daylight's colour, and at the foot of the garden one could hear the sweeping of the river, the flip-flop of its liquid flanks against the bank, against the boat-house . . . Once a boat floated past, making little more noise than the falling of down from a nest, or a flake of snow, yet its "swish, swish" brought the note of life even into the darkness. The perfume of flowers seemed to cry out as if the night gave them their arisings: because she was part of the witchery and the surface emotion of things, she wandered out into the garden. She could not bear the house, ay, more, nor any human being.

For an instant the man hesitated; he felt instinctively that she did not care if he followed or not. He could see the lilting of her gown on the grey-green grass—sable grey in spots, then almost white beneath the rays of light from the house. She was part of the mystery of the night, of the tight-drawn breath of the summer, of the moonless, starlit night; part of the river, part of the perfume of mignonette and heliotrope and lily, part of everything that was beautiful, part of the music which stirred her like weeping breezes, part of all the sad, sweet agony of life, part of hallucination, part of incomprehensible mirage, part of revelation of heaven or hell,—he knew not. All that he knew was that she did not understand how much he understood, and that he failed in understanding. He had mistrusted her; now he mistrusted himself. And like a shadow thrown by a passing, mysterious figure he followed her out into the dark garden.

They would pay for this, both of them, he knew it, but the moment was worth all the price. Without knowing it he was making at once a pact with heaven and hell.

On the grassy lawn, looking weird and syren-like, ethereal as a being from an outside world, she turned again and looked at him.

"Why have you come?" the look said, "I need no one—I belong to the world of dreams—you disturb me."

"I don't want to worry you. I—I—don't know why I said that. You would never believe—but I want you to be happy. . . I—I had an idea that you were unhappy, miserable, broken-hearted, I—and—oh, well, of course how could you need me? Only I wanted you to know that if——Oh, how could you believe in me, how could you understand, why should you count me? How could I matter in your life—only——"

Out of the house, passing black as the messenger of death between the portals of eternity, yet trying always to be a gentleman, succeeding, a gentle, courteous, tender, chivalrous man, Sledmere stepped from the ballroom into the conservatory, which was nothing but a glass-covered verandah with French windows leading into the garden. The news he carried, mingled with all the worry and distress he felt at knowing that Susan was out there on the lawn with Phillip Arbuthnot, when half the guests were at supper and the other half dancing; the news, all, everything were part of the rapture and agony of being married to Susan Roach. He approached, half diffident, half assertive.

"Susan, I want to speak to you."

He drew her aside, and the other man lit a cigarette and wandered between rows of distilled sweetness rising through the moist darkness. Once she had left the other man and followed him slowly towards the light, Sledmere's mood of agony subsided. She had had a moment of fright. Now it changed to the swift pain of renewed motherhood, the pain which is like the reiterated pangs of childbirth each time the voice of the child calls.

Now he was all grief, and the distress in him covered her as with a mantle, enveloped her.

"Don't be frightened, little woman"—her face was white beneath the pathway of light, the stream of it from the house.

"I've had a telegram from Pearson," Pearson was the nurse—"nothing really alarming, but——" his voice grew husky—"the boy's had another attack of croup and she's sent for the doctor."

She caught at Aubrey, her husband.

"Can we get there to-night? Is there a train?" She had forgotten the man who paced the garden.

"No, but the motor . . . I've ordered it at once—I knew you'd want to get there at once." The voice ill-disguised its triumph of knowledge, that if *he* could not draw her away the children could.

"Oh yes, of course, at once—I'll go and fetch a cloak."

"Joséphine has got one in the hall—you must come and have a cup of soup, champagne or something."

He had arranged everything, while she—she had been talking to the man he hated.

They teufed, teufed along silently in the night. The thoughts of both were filled with the child, hers exclusively. She had started without changing her dress, merely wound a thick, gauze veil round her head and slipped a heavy cloak on. He had explained to his sister, he said, so there had been no delay. The dancing and the music went on without them; when she was missed by some they fancied she had gone to bed. She had made no engagements to dance. . . But Sledmere's thoughts were not entirely with the boy.

He had meant to ask her never to dance with Phillip Arbuthnot, he had even prepared his words, " Why on earth do you single out that fellow ? "

Now he was glad that he had not to say it. Sitting beside her in her great anxiety, his thoughts grew gentler.

How could she have refused him, that particular man, since she wanted to dance ? As for Susan, she had forgotten the man, forgotten to look round to see where he was in the dark garden ; forgotten to tell him why she went, to bid him good-night. She left him unintentionally unheeding, her thoughts full of anxiety for the child, with the impression that Sledmere had taken her away from him.

This impression strengthened the belief that she was not to be trusted, that Sledmere was afraid.

Sledmere's mistrust of her seemed to place her more within his reach.

CHAPTER XX

SUSAN SLEDMERE paced her room, the pretty sitting-room giving out of her bedroom, a prey to a hundred emotions. The sensation of drowning had come to her again, but this time the power to cry out for help had gone ; there was no one at hand to help. Vandegger was grinding away in Rome at a picture of which the face was once more, without his knowing it even, like the face of Susan, only this time it was the picture of a Madonna—not a calmly, serenely-triumphant Madonna with her child standing erect on her knee blessing the world, but a crushed, wretched Madonna bowed to earth, a mother bereaved, with lines of pain about her mouth and dull, set eyes : the face of Susan with all the mischief pressed out of it, as he had seen her at Aeschi, humiliated, miserable, not so much at Rinaldo's death, as at the cause of it.

Dear old Prym was at Leghorn, and Sledmere for the first time since their marriage was away. He had been obliged to go to Scotland to attend the funeral of an uncle.

He would have liked to ask Susan to go into the country, but he was afraid to show the jealousy implied by such a suggestion. She would see through it, that wonderfully far-seeing wife of his, and if she did not despise him for his jealousy, she would certainly revolt against his despotism. He was beginning to know her so well. He could imagine the tone in which she would say,

"I've been asking you the whole summer to take me away, and you've refused, and now you want me to go away alone and be bored to death."

She would laugh at him. Once more he reproached himself for not being able to trust her—he wanted to be able to.

What so perturbed Susan was a letter which lay on her writing-table and which she had read through two or three times, each time in a different mood, each time overcome by different impulses, and every time without considering or remembering Sledmere. It was always like this with her—the present enveloped her completely and obliterated for the moment those she loved, those who loved her, as the veil of the night obliterates the daylight. Once more the adventurous in her tingled for new emotions, the restless storm-spirit craved for the stress and splendour of the roaring gale and for battle and conquest and play with fire. Something within her seemed to hurl her, exultant, towards danger.

"If you will not let me see you because you are alone, then you do not trust me, do not believe what I told you last night. You say that you are afraid of yourself. What has that to do with it, since you have nothing to fear from me? I want one long, quiet chat with you, such as we have never had, and then I shall be content to leave you alone, to pass out of your life. Surely you will not deny me this one consolation."

"I told you last night."

Yes, and the night before. She had seen him every evening lately, she could not avoid him, she told Sledmere, without seeming actually rude, without making him imagine things.

And the conversations had become earnest, more personal, more intimate, the woman regaining again the ascendancy, the power she had fancied she had lost over the man, and the man half-inquisitive, half-doubtful, bowing his head.

He had abused her to his friends; now he owned that he had been mistaken, while inwardly he hoped that he had made no mistake. "She is the most wonderful woman in London," he said now, and his friends laughed at his too-evident infatuation.

He could not bring himself to the belief that she was in love with Sledmere—a woman like her, and a man like him—it was too unlikely. If she was, then she was not the woman he imagined her to be, not the woman he had heard she was, not the woman she looked like.

That was always the trouble with Susan, that she looked so blatantly full of incident, mysterious without secrecy—like a sun-kissed landscape between valleys of shadow, remarkable and attractive, absorbing the vision, concentrating it.

" You do not trust me."

She laughed to herself.

Was it wonderful that she did not trust men ? All except one man, and he. . . . She stood by the table for an instant looking down, ashamed at her own thoughts. He trusted her. Did he, though ? The next moment all the energy of thought was alert.

No, she didn't believe that he did. That, in a sense, was the bond between them, that sense of want of trust which made him watch her always, fear her and love her at the same time on his side ; on hers, the alternate impulse to shock him or to surprise him by her docility. There was battle between them really, and it was battle that kept her alive.

" How bored he would be really if he had a dear frump for a wife," she would say to herself. " Perhaps if he had never known me. . . . But if I die. . . . Oh, I can imagine his marrying quite a quiet woman, a dear, placid thing, just from reaction, and then wondering why life was so dull! Oh, poor number two. I wouldn't be her for worlds!"

But the thought of Sledmere soon passed. Adventure beckoned to her—and she had no courage, no strength of will to resist it. It was part of "the sea's swift fire" in her veins. She was alone, unguarded, and like a naughty child she wished to make the most of her freedom.

Everything had led up to it gradually. It had become a habit now for her to meet him, Phillip, and she pretended not to know that he went only to the places where she could meet him. She had grown, too, to know that he was studying her, that he too disbelieved in her, but that it was the disbelief which charmed him, while it distressed Sledmere.

As usual she had blurted out many things to him, the horror of the past, her love of the peaceful years she and her husband had spent together in the country or travelling, her love for her children and her great fear of the future —her fear of herself.

"I'm always so afraid that I shall burst out again," she had told him. "I don't want to. I'm really perfectly happy, and Sledmere's such a dear. . . . Oh he has behaved so splendidly. I should be such a brute, and yet——"

"You are bound to burst out," Phillip Arbuthnot had told her, "bound to. One might as well ask the mountain torrent to dry up, as to ask you to lead the ordinary humdrum life of an ordinary woman."

"The spirit of the wanton." He, too, seemed to detect it in her, and it annoyed her.

"Why do you always talk as if I were so different? Oh, it's all this talk of it, treating me as if I were, which makes me feel different. Why can't you all behave to me as if I were like others? Why can't you all leave me alone?"

And he had left her alone, then always they gravitated towards each other again, always the undying flame flared up again, the flame of the man's interest in the new, the untried, the beautiful, and woman's acquiescence in his pursuit of it; and in Susan, notwithstanding her femininity, there was also something of the same masculine characteristic, the desire for new sensation, for adventure; the difference between the man and the woman lying in the fact that the woman sought sensation apart from the particular man, and the man sought it only from the one woman who had pleased him for the time, who mystified him, perplexed him.

The commonplace of their attraction to each other, the similarities of the difference, and the differences of the similarity, the way two human beings, the endless groups of two, have ran the same gamut of emotion ever since the world began,—all this they never thought of. The limitlessness of man and woman's belief, that they will be different to others, that they are different, makes the world go on.

And it was against this desire for new emotion that Susan's better self hurled itself, while something within her, whether of inherited unstable blood or of storm, stirred to action the fresh endeavour to invite cataclysms.

"He should never have left me, I am like a mad woman. . . . I ought always to have a keeper," she said scoffingly to herself. "It isn't safe to leave me alone."

She had told the servants to say "not at home," and she had countermanded an order given for the carriage to come round at four o'clock. This must all be fought out alone. While she paced the room she asked herself whether she would have the strength to sit "boring myself to death," she put it, till Sledmere came back.

She had lost faith since Rinaldo's death in her own strength to deal with life.

But the afternoon passed away without her answering the note, while the dullness of it strengthened the temptation to have one "final fling"—she spoke of it thus to herself—before she disappeared again for ever "into the twilight of boredom," the twilight in which objects become indistinct and intangible, and there is not enough light to read by or to work.

Why was life so utterly tame when one was respectable?

The excess of vitality within her craved for more food for the mind. Society really bored her inexpressibly in itself. It was the light and the music alone that fascinated her, and the sea of faces.

English women were for the most part "frumps," she declared sweepingly; the only real aristocracy left was the Austrian and the German, perhaps the Russian; but she didn't know anything about it, the society which could afford to be familiar with peasants, but which abhorred the *bourgeoisie*.

There was no reason for anything that was done in England, while England ponderously declared that it ruled the world. Perhaps it did. She could quite imagine that it was the dull office for the transaction of all the world's business. With what a far lighter, more humorous touch, for all its hard work, America made its millions and spent it on its women and children! What America could never do would be to spend other nation's millions as England did America's. Once Sledmere had declared, jealous even of its corruption, that there was no more frivolous society than England's if you went in for the smart, fast set, which he declared he loathed, while the frivolity, the inconsequent, the unstable, the past in Susan fascinated him. He did not know, Sledmere, that the fascination of Susan lay in the fact that she kept him on tenterhooks, and she had retorted,

"Yes, but how loathsome, how disgusting, the fastness of England is, how out of keeping with England, how ridiculous; and always at its back the hideous blasphemy of fake—religion—'a method in its madness.'"

The deep philosophy of the phrase, how it atrophies even the Bible!

A method in crime, a method in love, a method in business, a method—how ridiculous to talk of methods in connection with anything that was the outcome really of flights of the imagination struggling against methods, against system, against hide-bound conventionalities, yet in England the moment the bell rang demanding the programme——

The artistic—how it was missing in the soul of things in England, for all its pictures, for all its music. What saved her as the wife of Sledmere was that she suspected him of having the artistic spirit beneath everything else, some reincarnation was his of far-away souls who had understood life.

Her children came to her after tea, and never had she been more delightful with them—never had they so tumbled over her and kissed her, and with sudden reaction of feeling she had talked to them about their father. They were always to love him because he was so good, and the younger Aubrey, called "Bray boy," asked her, with his wonderful eyes fixed upon her—eyes that were neither like Sledmere's nor hers, but which had in them the light of both,

"Do you love farver, mummy?"

"Why, of course I do."

"Better than anyone else in the whole world?"

Bianca, the only girl, asked this rather doubtfully.

The other boy, the baby, said nothing, but helped himself to a forbidden cake, and Susan's sense of humour was aroused by what he was doing. In that way she avoided answering her little daughter. If she had she could have said with truth that she loved Sledmere better than anybody else in the world. For the moment she certainly cared for him better than anyone else, but then she didn't really love anyone.

"You dear, fat thing,"—she caught hold of her youngest child. "I can imagine that that is just exactly what you will always do. While everyone is discussing the emotions, you will help yourself stolidly to forbidden cakes and get all the good out of life. That's right, seize the substance, with all the raisins in it, and leave the shadow to everyone else."

The baby, relieved at not being scolded, munched his cake and smiled at her.

It was at that instant that Susan discerned in her youngest born something which resembled herself, although he could not speak yet, and which remained a link between him and her all her life. It was strange how the characteristics of the parents divided themselves up in the children as the years went by. The eldest son was like Sledmere in his passion for his mother, but possessed something of his mother's passionate wistfulness for the analysis of life.

The girl was absolutely a Cary,—refined, gentle, absolutely orthodox. The flashes of some other perception of life which might be inherited from or developed by her mother, or might be latent replicas of the spirit which had made Sledmere fall in love with Susan, though so different to his former ideals, might develop later.

The youngest had her mischievous love of life, her self-will, and in a way her philosophy—certainly her impulsiveness. Once he flew in a rage at his father's calf and bit it, because he had forbidden something, while his curly black hair and dancing eyes seemed a revival, or throw-back of the Italian blood in her.

Instinctively Sledmere disliked his younger son, albeit he recognised in him the mother's temperament—the temperament which had attracted him, while he feared it.

"That young chap's going to be a handful," he would say to Susan, laughingly, yet with a seriousness underlying the laughter which Susan understood.

It was as if he had said to her: "He's a del Val, a foreigner."

When the children had been fetched away by the nurse, the twilight settled again around her.

Oh, the inexpressible dullness of a great London house when the mistress of it is interested neither in society nor good works, nor in the breeding of prize dogs or poultry, nor in art!

It was the unemployed in her which rioted for work or the bread of adventure.

At seven o'clock she had decided to write round to a woman friend whom she tolerated rather than liked, to go to the opera with her, when a note was brought to her.

She knew the handwriting now. An answer was required.

"I'll send one presently. Let the man go."

It was the final throw of the serpent's die, and the number that was going to turn up was going to be the most *impair* of all, *impair* and *noir*. It would be the last time that she would hear the voice of the croupier of life's gambling tables call out to the gambling spirit within her—"*Faites votre jeu.*"

After that she would never play again, and it would rest with fate, with the tiny, agitated ball of circumstance, whether she left the tables beggared or sobered for life.

She had the sense of this being her last encounter with the storm as she wrote the note Phillip Arbuthnot so desired.

He had written:

"I await an answer. I will say no word to influence that answer, to plead or entreat—not that anything I write could influence you. You know what it means to me whether you say 'yes' or 'no.'"

She had one impulse—to write across his letter "No" in big letters, and place it in a fresh envelope and send it to him.

But the impulse was not as strong as the whisper of coming storm, so alluring. "Perhaps Sledmere will never be away again," whispered the storm.

"After all, why not?" The sullen gale rushed at heart and soul by backways. "Why shouldn't you see your friend? Other women do."

The storm scoffed this at her, growling.

"Of course if you wish to see me, by all means look in after dinner. Please come early, as I am going on to the Ilkestons at eleven."

That to her was the saving clause in the note. There could be no harm in his looking in after dinner.

Phillip Arbuthnot with a rush of excited gladness, told himself that she would not go on to the Ilkestons.

CHAPTER XXI

"THERE'S a gentleman downstairs wishes to speak to your ladyship."

"Show him up."

How stupid servants were.

"He didn't give no name, Miladi."

The mysteriousness of the butler's manner escaped Susan, because she had been playing on the piano, and did not look up.

"Just show him up."

She did not even raise her eyes from the notes as she gave the order, her fingers still striking a note or two as she spoke.

It was not till later as the man left the room that it struck her as odd that the man had not recognised Phillip Arbuthnot. Was it possible that Sled—— No, the very idea was absurd. She glanced at the clock; already she was beginning to regret her decision to see Phillip. She was not even sure that he was interesting or amusing enough to make the interview exciting. If he made love to her, which he was sure to do, she would either have to send him away or she would feel horrible afterwards. Sledmere's high ideals, the sense of dignity with which he had tried to inspire her had to a certain extent done work. She felt a flash of consciousness that the fact that she received this man alone in Sledmere's absence at this hour, cheapened her again in her own eyes.

She had even, with a return to childlike mischievousness, half resolved to sit demurely talking of indifferent things, the weather, the opera, while he chafed and fumed, disappointed, on the chair opposite to her.

She had one thought, a noble one, that she would try and make him a friend, a good, noble friend who would never make love to her, who would understand that better self of which she was aware, and of which many had perceptions—the better self lying like mother earth, immovable beneath the storm, yielding leaves, grass, twigs, flowers, even the trees planted in its bosom, granting everything to the storm but itself.

"He isn't that kind. What's the good of pretending?"

No, he wasn't that kind. If he had been, she told herself, there would have been no fun in seeing him, in letting him come. It was the fact that he wasn't which had induced her to let him come.

The spirit of the wanton!

"Oh well, of course, if that is so, it's no use my pretending to be anything else." As she had not tried to justify herself, her "depraved" self, she had called it in those days to the

Cardinal, so to-night she told herself that she needed adventure in order to go on with life. Sledmere was a dear, of course, but he was so English, and then—why couldn't he see that it wasn't safe for her to come to London ?

With that wonderful *insouciance* of hers, she had forgotten Rinaldo's death and the gruesome photograph ; she had forgotten all fear for the future. She had a strange, optimistic faith in her own luck. She would never go under—not completely ; she was too rich, too beautiful. Besides she didn't want to do anything wrong really, only to bring men to her feet and then kick them away—a dangerous game.

She had learned quite young to compare the men, the men who didn't mind being kicked away and who were still faithful, who turned into friends, and the men who hated her for it and became enemies . . . like Lori.

The thought of Lori, coming quite at the end of a train of thought, made her shiver.

As the servant left the room she glanced at the clock. "Half past nine! Quite a decent hour."

One hour and a half of chat, of encounter, and then she would go to the Ilkestons, and after that she would never see him again, not alone like this—never——

She had dressed before dinner in the dress in which she was going to the Ilkestons. It was a wonderful dress, one of those which only she could have thought out—a dress of indefinite colours, like the shadow of a rainbow, like the opals she wore mingled with diamonds in her hair, round her neck, on the bosom of her dress; a dress of shot colours, soft as night-clouds, yet with the metallic, dull brilliancy in it of the moon, the quiet greys and mauves and half-tints of pale green and sapphire sobering the vermilion effects of her colouring, of her complexion and her hair, yet making it more remarkable by contrast. A long *sautoire* hung from her neck almost to her knees, a chain Sledmere had given her of stones of alternate colours, pink, topaz and star sapphires, diamond and amber, aquamarine and soft moonstones, then again topaz and star sapphire, and diamond.

All the colours were subdued, of dress and jewels alike, giving the effect of a quiet dress in the darker corners of the big drawing-room, till she passed beneath some great wealth of light, when it sparkled and shimmered and dazzled the eyes, the only striking note which at once modified the radiance and emphasized it being a band of black, woven into the stuff and appearing once beneath the bosom, then disappearing and appearing again to shade the left side of the skirt just where, in *directoire* fashion, a limb would have been visible. "Just a touch of black to tell the world that Sledmere's uncle is dead, a speaking, emphatic touch to portray the worst side of one," she had said to herself before leaving her room, as she looked at herself in the glass.

At dinner she had read a French novel, and become so engrossed in it that she wished that she had not told Phillip Arbuthnot to come. She would have liked to lie on the sofa with a cigarette, and finish it before she went on to the Ilkestons. If it hadn't been for the trouble she had taken to dress, and but for the fact that she knew that the dress was perfect, she would have liked to read it till she went to bed.

" Poor Joséphine would have a fit if it wasn't seen."

All this had passed through her mind during the two to three hours between the answer she had sent to Phillip and the servant's message.

She had sat down to the piano after dinner from sheer desultoriness. If she finished the book before he came she would have nothing to read in bed. If he came in while she was at the most exciting chapter, he would bore her to death. With the instinct of the real epicure she closed the book, leaving the five most thrilling chapters, containing the *dénouement* which she already guessed at, to read when she was in bed or having her hair brushed. Joséphine would have to sit up since Sledmere was not there to unlace her.

As she heard steps outside she whispered to herself, " Why couldn't he have had himself announced as usual, without all this mystery ? "

The servant threw open the door.

" Lori."

Lori here in London—here in her husband's house ! The man who had killed Rinaldo !

A wave of anger took the place of the terror which had seized her at sight of him. He stooped a little and his chest looked narrow. He gave the impression of a man who was closing up, who could be clapped together like a screen. In day-dress, the day-dress of the foreigner, official yet seedy, with his hat in his hand and that wolfish, horrible look on his face which yet was handsome, he looked out of place in the room.

She had an instinct to cry out, to say to the butler, " Don't go, send this man away," but the sight of him paralysed her.

The servant closed the door, wondering, then went downstairs. She was alone with this man, and she felt that his eyes took stock of the richness of her jewels, of the beauty and luxury of her surroundings rather than of herself. She feared him, but he was more dangerous than she knew. He had come to his tether's end. He was living with Faustina in a wretched lodging house, living on the money Sledmere had given unwisely, perhaps, yet with the instinct to shield his wife's name from gossip, because, as he had said, he thought that all was at an end. Lori had watched and watched, and shadowed her movements, and dogged her footsteps till fate had thrown across his path one of the marmitons who, although in her employ, Susan would not have known had she met him in the street or on the stairs, and who, bribed with Sledmere's own money, had told him that " Milord had gone away."

Faustina was bound to silence, but he. . . . Faustina had obtained money; he, Lori, would filch thousands for each hundred that had been given her.

The past, the great harvest of a woman's wild oats rose like ghosts from the *spicuisitude* of the morass of her past, and pointed fingers at her.

For one instant she quailed. Then the inheritance of the blood of the courageous, face to face with the horrors of life, surged in her veins, bringing the great calm, " the glory of despair."

Lady Sledmere raised her head, and the magnificence of the gesture made her tower above him as if she were a giantess, instead of merely his equal in height, for he was not of the tall Romans, and she was above the average height of women.

" I think you have made a mistake." She walked towards the bell.

Lori made a gesture to stop her. " Carissima."

She made a gesture of recoil that was like that of a serpent before it shoots its venom into the veins of the enemy, raised her head like the hooded cobra in the jungle at the clubbed feet of the elephant which would trample upon it; and he, the infamous man, was for a moment held at bay by her beauty, by her grandeur, by her wrath. Had he then mistaken the fullness of her power?

Faustina had told him that she had not seen "Miladi," only the great "Milordi" who was "*come un dio, tanto nobile, tanto simpatico, tanto inamorato.*"

Had she some key to power which he knew not of?

The Latin blood in him recoiled before the Saxon. Was it possible that, married to an English Milordi, she yet resented his having killed her first husband?

All his sense of humour rose to combat this idea.

She had not loved Rinaldo, since she had left him. She had loved the Cardinal, and everyone knew that Cardinal Sapponi was above reproach. She had married a great "signore" of England. Did he know what his wife's past had been? The essence of everything lay in this. Did he know?

Faustina declared that he did, but what faith could one put in a woman?

Susan's heart died within her. She was

half-conscious of two things: the desire that Phillip Arbuthnot should arrive to save her, the loathing that he should find her with this man.

The door opened.

"Mr. Arbuthnot."

The servant announced Phillip in the normal tones of the up-to-date servant. His eyes fell respectfully on Lady Susan, with scathing comment on the foreigner who seemed to be closing up more rapidly than anyone could have suspected. As he closed the door behind him, there was the sense of relief that in his lordship's absence there should be anyone so nearly approaching him in birth and breeding as Mr. Arbuthnot to counteract the strange visit of the seedy foreigner.

Arbuthnot's expression passed quickly from one of surprise to one of solicitude. His air seemed to say: "Am I *de trop*, or do you need me? Chuck me out or command me."

No word had passed yet between Lori and Lady Susan, yet there was something in her attitude standing there which told him that tragedy was beating its wings above them all.

There was the first bitter sense of disappointment, of doubt of her. Then the English gentleman asserted himself, he became the squire of dames, the *preux chevalier*. Instinctively he arraigned himself on the side of

Sledmere, and for the sake of an Englishman's honour, on the side of the Englishman's wife.

"Would you mind—— ?"

He did not recognise Lady Susan's voice when she began to speak.

"Would you mind seeing this man out? I hate to bother you." Then as Phillip Arbuthnot hesitated: "He killed my husband, the Duca d'Ostia. . . . I don't know how he dares——"

Phillip exchanged fierce glances with Lori, who sneered:

"Is this your husband?" he asked mockingly. "No, your husband is away, is that not so?"

"Mr. Arbuthnot, please——"

Susan Sledmere's face was whiter than the white walls of the drawing-room.

Phillip Arbuthnot opened the door, and his glance compelled the man to move.

At the door Lori turned with a quick, vicious gesture.

"The old story, eh, Miladi—'*Il y en a toujours un autre?*'"

Lady Susan's face blazed, but she did not answer him. She and Phillip were at least in unison in this, that this man must go; afterwards they would understand each other. Even now she revolted against the British in him, at having to do obeisance to the Englishman in the hour of crisis.

" Nous nous reverrons."

Lori said this with a nasty laugh as he approached the door, and the earnestness in Arbuthnot's face terrified Lady Susan more than Lori's scorn.

For at the open door, standing one moment hesitating on the landing, then with the calm collectedness of the grand seigneur, entered Sledmere.

Lori rushed down the stairs and out into the street.

There was a moment's silence as Sledmere looked from Susan to Arbuthnot.

" I'm glad I came in time to render your wife a service. This brute was annoying her, but I think we've got rid of him."

" I'm much obliged to you, Arbuthnot."

The words, the tone, set Phillip a million miles away from Lady Susan, it seemed to set the seal upon him of the code of Sledmere's honour, to make him the friend of Sledmere.

" I—I——" Sledmere did not look at his wife, but she knew that each word was meant for her. " I was able to return earlier than I expected. . . . but I'm glad that you were at hand to rid my wife of this disagreeable visitor."

Phillip gave an uneasy laugh. " Well, I'm deuced glad that you returned in time to frighten off the brute. He didn't look like going till you appeared on the scene."

"So am I." There was a solemn tone in Sledmere's speech.

The eyes of the two men met, and Sledmere's seemed to say: "How came you here?"

The traditions of both of them had to meet on an open, honest plane.

Phillip Arbuthnot held out his hand.

Lady Susan looking at them, felt as if both repudiated her, the dangerous, tiresome woman.

"I'm glad too, Sledmere"—Phillip spoke with sincerity—"that you came back to-night."

As the two men clasped hands there was an unuttered "Thank God" which hovered between them, the imagined sound of which irritated her. The appearance of Lori had terrified her for an instant, sickened her. Yet even in this terrible moment the humorous thought had flashed that the moment of his entrance had conveyed nothing like the terror produced by Sledmere's entrance, and the confused consciousness that what he would want explained was the presence, not of Lori, but of Arbuthnot.

That he and Lori should meet Sledmere here to-night was indeed the climax of the storm. After that there could be nothing but a dull, dead calm, or a torrential downpour that would sweep her off the face of the earth. That she had, legally speaking, done nothing wrong was but scant comfort, with the impression made upon her by the look on Sledmere's face, though he kept his gaze steadily averted from her, never once addressed her.

What filled her at once with shame and revolt, the two struggling within her, the defiance of the latter weakened by the self-abasement of the former, was the thought of how she must seem to all three of them.

How could she tell that Arbuthnot did not think that she was acting a part when she bade him get rid of Lori . . . and Lori, that sneering loathsome face, how she hated it now! Oh, how could she, could she ever have spoken to the man?

She grew hot and cold with shame when she thought of how she had stolen to Vandegger's studio to meet him; of the hours spent there listening to his love-making.—"*Il y en a toujours un autre.*"

He, too, had detected in her "the spirit of the wanton."

But worst of all was the sense of loss conveyed by the expression on Sledmere's face. He would never believe in her again—never. The past—that he had forgiven; but this—this he would never forgive.

At that moment the sense of loss turned to the deep, fierce yearning of complete, unconditional surrender of passionate love.

"Aubrey!"

Had he heard her voice and paid no attention, or had her lips moved and no sound been uttered? She could not tell.

She was vaguely conscious that the two men were trying to behave as if nothing had happened, that Phillip Arbuthnot was bidding her farewell, trying to speak naturally.

"Aubrey!"

Oh, how could he remember his duties of host at such a moment, and follow Phillip down to the door?

Her mind, side-tracking painfully, hysterically, aroused the half-humorous thought,

"Perhaps he'll even give him a whisky and soda."

Why go with him instead of staying with her, who needed him so to-night?

At the foot of the stairs, Sledmere, in a voice which made what he asked, notwithstanding its courtesy, sound like a command, spoke to Phillip.

"I need hardly ask you that this—what has happened, I mean, to-night—should remain strictly between ourselves."

"I think you need not ask me that." Then Phillip Arbuthnot added: "My word of honour."

The two men clasped hands again.

As he walked away from the Sledmere's door, Phillip felt that he had found new footing for his thoughts, that while Lady Susan still perplexed him, while the wonder of whether she "ran straight" or not, still remained a problem, he yet could understand the charm Sledmere would throw over her. And in the midst of uncertainties and doubts about her, he yet felt the dawning of a belief in what she had told him, namely, that she cared for her husband in despite of the storm-temperament which always invited cataclysms.

And the sense of understanding better brought, as it always does, saner thoughts, and the saner thoughts brought with them a feeling of shame that he should have tried to tempt Susan, to take advantage of the love of adventure she had confessed to so openly.

They had not had their talk, the final talk which was to have been his consolation for not seeing her again. . . . He knew now that he had hoped that the result of this talk would be not a passing out of her life, but the beginning of a more tender intimacy. The thought made him feel ashamed, a cad. With the expression on Sledmere's face it seemed an impossible, an outrageous thought—an infamy; yet for all that they had not had their hour's chat. It would have been more than an hour; she would not go on to the Ilkestons, he had thought. He yet would pass out of her life, "leave her alone" as she had once put it—leave her alone with Sledmere.

As he turned the key in the door of his rooms in Duke Street, (for to-night he had no inclination to go on anywhere, not even to his club), he wondered how Sledmere would take it, what he would say to her when they were alone.

It was a better man who passed back into the house than the one who had left it an hour ago.

He was glad that Lori had been there, glad that Sledmere had returned—in time.

It was after the door had closed on Phillip, that Sledmere wondered what he was going to do with his life. He was still dazed with the agony of it all. The blow he had thought to avert had fallen. The evil prognostications of his oft-repressed imaginations, the veiled suggestions of others, all these had been realised. She had been right, Susan, *his wife*, when she had told him that he must not leave her a minute, that he must take her away. The pain of the disappointment, of the ill-success of his experiment hurt him, while he blamed himself more than her.

Lori, he had thought nothing of finding Lori. It was odious, but he supposed, with a feeling of helplessness about the thought, that these kind of things were bound to reappear now and then after such a girlhood as Susan's. And Prym's words, "settle down,"—how derisive they seemed! But the dominating thought, the one that brought agony, was the one which formed the answerless question.

"What was Arbuthnot doing here? What would have happened if Lori had not been there?"

The man wouldn't speak—he, Sledmere, had seen to the shielding of her name, but the suffering lay in that unanswerable question—one which even Susan herself in her sincerest outburst of confidence or confession could never answer. That suffering could never be healed, never. For an instant he stood in the large tesselated hall with its clumps of flowers in corners, and the great table of inlaid marbles strewn with cards on which were printed many of the greatest names in Europe—staring dully at the closed door, then he passed into the library and threw himself wearily into a chair.

And upstairs the woman, Susan, the storm-child, Bianca's child, stood where they had left her, with her face bowed in her two hands with that gesture of a child's despair which Sledmere had always thought so pathetic.

This, too, was her moment of greatest agony, when she saw for the first time what the past, the sowing of a woman's wild oats, had done for her—robbed her of her first, her only real love.

Oh, how farcical everything else seemed in proportion with the immensity of her loss. Long she stood there, then she raised her head and listened. Was he coming upstairs ?"

No, the silence of the great house answered her, joining with the mute, wild throbbing of her heart.

He would never come.

CHAPTER XXII

THE first pale streaks of dawn were creeping across the Square, still too powerless to turn the grey dust-colour of the leafage to green, and were insinuating themselves into this corner and that of the library; the dark brown of leather bindings took on a lighter hue here and there, and one long, pale, gold finger lay across a table.

The form of the man sitting there in the armchair still, looked like part of the deeper shadows of the room, only the face, how haggard it looked as the pale streaks followed each other into the room! There was no sleep in those wide-open staring eyes, yet the look conveyed the idea of hopeless weariness.

And the dawn made the features of another face faintly discernible, a face as haggard and pale as his own, a face grown thin and almost pinched in five short hours. The dawn played feebly with the jewels and sequins on her dress, making them brighten, but without sparkle, and the streak of black so cunningly devised by the great Parisian dressmaker added to the impression she gave of being a night cloud, of emerging from shadow, as if at the touch of the enlarging brightness of day she would dissipate and vanish, or stand forth in her former radiance, crimson touched, scintillating, quivering with renewed life. She, too, had not slept, but half crouched, half lain upon the sofa in the drawing-room, unmindful of the coming and going of the servants to put out the light, unaware that she had permitted them to turn the room to darkness: crouched and lain there sobbing inwardly with that dry-eyed weeping which is the most terrible of all.

"Aubrey!"

A moment's silence, then the word "Yes?" uttered so wearily, in such a non-committal, hopeless manner, that the pain she had sought to stifle by coming to him, revived.

"Aubrey!"

She came and knelt beside him, and as she did so the freshness of her penitence, the sincerity of it, lost colour from the remembrance of that other time when she had knelt thus by the side of that other man and offered him her soul's salvation in exchange for his love.

The past—how it gripped and rendered powerless!

Never before had she so yearned for stainlessness of mind; the stainlessness of body was there, but the mind, how soiled it felt as she tried to take Aubrey's hand, and he withdrew it!

She had not felt such deep respect, such self-abasement, kneeling at the Cardinal's feet. Her eyes had been humid with passion then, now they were humid with tears of tender love, of remorse, of despair. Yet because this was all real, the life of it was missing. Histrionic art rises above in vehemence, the quiet, permeating monotone of sincerity.

Could she woo him back to her by using the words he had so often asked her to utter? Yet those, too, were used ones, second-hand. Once she had said to that other man, the Cardinal of Rome who despised her—with what passion she had once said,

"Can't you see—can't you see that I love you?"

Yet he had been right, the Cardinal of Rome, to scoff at her declaration, to treat it as hysteria. How wonderfully wise were the priests of the Church of Rome! Perhaps even as a man, a common human, he had detected the counterfeit.

His words came back to her as she knelt there.

"Lady Susan, you forget yourself." Then: "Too much Guy de Maupassant and novel-reading, too much money and nothing to do. I am shocked, Lady Susan, shocked and inexpressibly grieved——"

This man sitting here wouldn't be shocked and grieved. Once he had been feverishly anxious to hear the words, but she didn't know how to say them. It was too late—he wouldn't listen.

He was like the Cardinal in another way; he, too, would have none of her—now. Yet there were links between them which had not been between her and the Cardinal, nor between her and Rinaldo—the thought was a glorious one in the midst of misery: he, Aubrey Sledmere, was the father of her children.

He drew away his hand, and as she came closer, laying her hand on his knee, he rose. He looked gaunt and tall in the widening dawn.

Then, what was the best method of all to deal with him came to her, a heaven-born method, the only one that could reach him, because it was so entirely like herself.

She, too, rose to her feet.

"Oh dear, how cross it is! Don't you think it's rather hard to jump to a hundred conclusions without hearing what one has to say, without even listening for an explanation?"

Even in the half-defined, arabesque-like surroundings, she detected a lifting gleam in his eyes. But his voice, his manner, were very solemn.

He walked to the window, threw open the shutters, and looked out on to the approaching morning.

"I wish he hadn't done that; I could have talked so much better in the dark. I'm sure I look awful."

With returning optimistic hope of victory Susan's sense of humour was returning.

"I am ready to listen to what you have to say."

He spoke gravely—to the Square, not to her, Susan told herself.

And for quite a quarter of an hour she spoke, telling him everything—how she had loved the flame, but had no intention of being scorched by it; how she had not answered Phillip's first letter, and in the second told him that she was going on to the Ilkestons at eleven.

"I really didn't care if he came or not, I wanted to finish my book. But oh, Aubrey, I was so bored!" Then in a lighter tone,

"After all, if I had been another woman, the dear old English frump of a wife you might have had—I won't say that you *ought* to have had, because I think I suit you down to the ground really——"

Her audacity made him smile inwardly, though his lips were set. Relief, intense relief, was stealing to him slowly, breaking the barriers down—the barriers of mistrust, of disillusion, of jealousy.

"If I had been, you know, you wouldn't have thought anything of my seeing a man from nine-thirty to ten-thirty, perhaps eleven p.m."

She spoke with the flippancy of despair. If she did not take it all lightly as she wanted him to take it, she would fail.

Then as he did not speak, trying to say the words jestingly, though her throat was dry—"As a matter of fact you ought to be thankful that I had allowed him to come. He saved me from that brute."

"Oh, you don't understand!" he burst out.

"Oh yes, I do. It's all awful, of course, to be married to such an impossible woman—

but—" she came a step nearer, " but you know it isn't every man "—she slid her soft, bare arm into his—" it isn't every man who's loved as you are by his wife."

" Love ! "

The scoffing tone in which he said this frightened her. Then her courage came back. Evidently this was her trump card—that she loved him.

" Yes, 'love,' just love, very commonplace, but the real thing."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. Some telepathic communication brought the news to her brain that she had conquered.

" I told you," she spoke reproachingly, " not to bring me to London, not to try experiments. It's all your own fault. Oh, Aubrey, how happy I was with you alone. Why did you pitchfork me into this 'rotten' London ? "

Her slang sounded like the voice of a long-lost, familiar friend. His two arms closed round her.

" Is it true, Susan. . . . Do you—— ? "

" Love you." She finished the words, looking up at him, and the beauty of her was like the magnificence of the rising day. The scent of her hair intoxicated him.

" Take me away and see," she added passionately. She threw her two arms round his neck.

" To the ends of the earth . . . for alway . . .s."

The words died away on his lips.

THE END.

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